THE TREASURE OF THE RED TRIBE

Major Charles Gilson

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THE TREASURE OF THE RED TRIBE

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The Treasure of the Red Tribe

By

Major Charles Gilson

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By JOHN DE WALTON

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
1.	The Mystery of Talai	1
2.	Lubanshi's Story	20
3.	In the Wizard's Power	36
4.	Into the Unknown	54
5.	The Obongo Attack	74
6.	Lost!	87
7.	The Quest	108
8.	The Escape	126
9.	Rubies of Lulawanga	137
10.	The Bush-Spirit	155
11.	Valletta Comes Back	170
12.	Over the Falls	186
13.	The Wizard Calls	198
14.	Journey's End	209

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

"Nsongo flung back the lid of a great box. 'Behold with your own eyes the red stones of Lulawanga!' he cried" . . . . . *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

"'Master!' cried the savage. 'Oh, we will all die for this!'" 18

"Amid a shower of arrows Bryan and Lubanshi rushed through the gate" 124

"Lubanshi was about to pitch the pygmy into the red-hot embers, when George East intervened" . 176

THE TREASURE OF THE RED TRIBE

CHAPTER I

THE MYSTERY OF TALAI

MR. GEORGE EAST, agent of the Congo Trading Company at Balonga, on the Warimi River, was seated with his son Bryan upon the trunk of a felled tree, a few yards from the door of the "factory." It was what is called the "cool of the evening"; that is to say, in view of the fact that the sun had gone down beyond the great forest trees to the west, it was about ten degrees less hot than it had been an hour before. The atmosphere, nevertheless, was that of a vapour bath.

The word "factory" sounds imposing enough, suggesting tall chimneys, industry, activity, the employment of a number of workmen. A Congo factory, however, is nothing of the kind. It is just a few rough buildings, built of logs and thatched with palm leaves, used as a trading

station, where the innocent and unenlightened natives of the interior quite willingly exchange such valuable commodities as elephant tusks, cassava (from which tapioca is manufactured) and rubber for the cheapest Manchester goods, brass rods, hardware and penny looking-glasses.

A mist like steam rapidly spread itself upon the surface of the river. A flying fox glided noiselessly by with outstretched wings. In the branches of adjacent trees monkeys could be heard quarrelling among themselves before they settled down for the night.

This was the Unknown. George East, his son, and one other were the only white men who had ever entered the valley of the Warimi —and that other was a half-caste, Matteo Valletta, who called himself an Italian.

"I tell you what, Bryan," said East, cleaning the mouthpiece of his pipe with a feather, "Matteo is up to no good. I can't find out what his game is; but I've had ten years of this work, and I think I know the Congo."

"I wonder the Company trust him so far away from headquarters," said Bryan.

East proceeded to refill his pipe. "The Company!" he exclaimed. "They cannot

possibly know everything that goes on; their chief concern is what can be got out of the natives, and Matteo brings grist to the mill. How he does it I don't know. That's what I want to find out. I intend to make it my business. Why," he continued, raising his voice and throwing out both hands, " he has got a plantation around his factory where he grows bananas and manioc enough to feed an army! What's that for? And that's not the worst of it: I've some reason to believe that the man's a hypnotist."

" A hypnotist! " exclaimed the boy.

" Yes," East went on. " I've seen things I can't explain anyhow else. The last time I went down-river to Talai, I found a native on the river bank who might have been walking in his sleep. I spoke to him, and he never heard me. I even shook him, and he took no notice. He looked absolutely broken in spirit; and more than that, there were great weals upon his back, as if he had been struck with the lash of a whip."

Bryan got to his feet.

" If that's true," he cried, " we ought to make the villain pay for it! What right has he to take a whip to these poor, simple savages? "

The father also rose, and patted his son upon the shoulder.

"Your instincts are all right," said he. "But we must bide our time. As yet, I've no certain proof. You must remember, Valletta is not under my orders. Officially, I have no right to interfere with him. But I tell you this, old boy—I'm sick and tired of this country. In two months my time's up. I can either take promotion or retire. This is no place for a white man, much less for a boy."

By then it had grown almost dark. A great silence reigned in the forest on both banks of the swiftly flowing river. A little way to the left a fire was burning, where several natives were cooking their evening meal.

On a sudden the silence was broken by a sound that was half groan, half shriek, which came from the river bank, some little distance down the stream.

"What's that?" Bryan exclaimed.

East straightened, looked about him for an instant, and then passed into the hut, the door of which was open. Presently he came out again with a rifle under his arm and a lighted lantern in the other hand.

"What is it?" The boy repeated his question as he took the lantern from his father.

"I know no more than you, Bryan," answered East. "I never heard such a sound in my life. It wasn't earthly. The sort of cry one would expect an evil spirit to make—if there were such things as the ghosts and goblins that the natives believe in."

And thereupon the cry was repeated, nearer than before—a piteous, long-drawn howl like that of a dog.

"Come on!" said East. And followed by his son, he passed rapidly down the gentle, sandy slope that led to the riverside, and then turned down-stream.

Guided by the cries which were repeated about every half-minute, they reached presently the extremity of the clearing where the factory had been built; and there they came upon the figure of a man, lying flat upon his face on the ground.

This man might have been seriously wounded, for he seemed incapable of rising to his feet, even of moving. East bent down, rolled him over, and raised his head, which lolled backwards and forwards as if the poor fellow was unconscious.

Bryan, in the meantime, lifted the lantern, by the light of which they were able to see that the unfortunate man belonged to one of the broad-chested, comparatively civilized tribes that live on the main river, in villages of mud huts thatched with grass or palm leaves.

George East looked up at his son and whistled.

"There's mischief here," said he. "Strangely enough, this is the very man I told you of, the fellow I found at Matteo's factory wandering about by himself. I know him well. He's Matteo's personal servant. His name is Wanyani."

East shifted his right arm, with which he had been supporting the native; and as he did so, the man let out a loud cry as if he had been grievously hurt. The lantern revealed the truth; the poor fellow's back was cut in a score of places; from shoulder to shoulder were blood-stained weals that could have been made only by the lash of a whip—and a knotted lash.

"We must carry him," said Bryan. "You take his head, father, and I'll look after his feet. We must be careful, for the poor chap's in terrible pain."

In silence they bore him to the factory, where East laid the unhappy native upon his own bed.

After he had washed the man's wounds and dressed them, he questioned the fellow; but though he could speak the man's language perfectly, he received nothing that was intelligible in the way of a reply.

The native admitted that his name was Wanyani, that he was the personal servant of Matteo Valletta, the agent of the Talai factory down-stream. At the very mention of Matteo's name he shuddered, and on being questioned further suddenly burst into tears.

East turned to his son. His fists were clenched, his lips tight pressed together. There was a look in his eyes that Bryan had never seen before.

"Bryan," said he, "it may be no business of mine, but that fiend shall answer for this. I'm going down-river to Talai."

"To-night?" asked Bryan.

"Now. This very minute. The current's swift after the rain. We should be there in four hours. Get your rifle—and you had best bring your revolver, too."

Five minutes later, father and son were travelling rapidly down the river in a small canoe propelled by the paddles of four stalwart natives,

who were greatly assisted in their task by the velocity of the stream. The moon had now risen ; and by its light they could distinguish the gigantic trees towering like spectres on either bank of the narrow, twisting river. The jungle beneath the trees was impenetrably dark. In the silence and blackness that enveloped them it seemed to Bryan that there was something ominous, terrible and tragic. He had seen enough of the Great Forest to dread it, to realize that it contained a mystery—a mystery that could never be solved. A forest, thousands of square miles in area, extending over the entire centre of the vast continent, from the great lakes almost to the Atlantic coast, from the northern deserts to the majestic mountains of the south ; an area inhabited by wild animals and even wilder men, where there was very little to eat, where the traveller could scarce fail to lose his way and where he might as easily starve to death. Here reigned Death in his very grimmest aspect ; poison, murder, cannibalism, starvation and disease.

East sat in the canoe with his rifle across his knees. He was a big, raw-boned, black-bearded man, whose great physical strength had been

but little impaired by ten years of the tropics. In spite of the fact that he was well over six feet in height, he was of the type that never tires—thin, sinewy and wiry. And his son took after him. Bryan, although he was not yet eighteen years of age, had the strength of an ordinary man, and was a great deal more active than his father.

Soon after ten o'clock they came within sight of a great fire, burning upon the right bank of the river, by the light of which they could distinguish a narrow jetty made of bamboo, projecting from the river bank. Upon this pier the figure of a man appeared—a short, thick-set man, with a pointed beard, who carried a rifle under his arm.

"Who's that?" he cried.

It was East who answered, in a voice that was like the roar of a lion.

"What's that to you?" he shouted. "I've come here, Matteo Valletta, to find out what you're up to. I've a score of questions to ask you; and if I don't get a straight and honest answer to every one of them, you'll pay for it. And that's straight as man to man."

At once Matteo's rifle flew to his shoulder.

"Stop!" he cried. "I forbid you to land!"

East never answered; but those in the canoe heard the breech of his rifle open and shut.

"I forbid you to land!" cried Matteo again. "This is my factory and you have no business here. If you don't turn back at once, I shoot."

His answer came, but not in words. East sent a bullet whistling past his ear.

"That's just to bring you to your senses," he shouted. "You're not the only man on this confounded river who knows how to handle a gun. I've a magazine fully charged and I've got my sights on you now. Lower your rifle—or, by thunder, I drop you dead!"

Slowly, as with hesitation, the half-caste brought his rifle down. By then East's canoe had drawn alongside the jetty. Bryan was the first to step ashore; and Matteo turned upon him something after the manner in which a cat spits at a dog.

"What business have you here?" he demanded.

"You'll know quick enough," said East. "But first, I'll relieve you of this."

And at that he calmly took the rifle from Valletta's hands.

Matteo shrugged his shoulders. The flames of the camp-fire illumined the scene, about which there was something fantastic.

The various buildings that comprised the factory stood upon a hillock about a hundred yards from the river bank. Scattered here and there were a few gigantic trees which had been spared when the forest had been cleared. Westward—that is to say, down-stream—there was a wide expanse of open country which had been given over to cultivation; whilst across the river, the Great Forest was as dark as Erebus.

It would be impossible to imagine a more sinister-looking individual than Matteo Valletta. He was hatless; his hair was cropped to his skull. He grew a beard only upon the very point of his chin, and wore upon his upper lip a close-cut, black moustache, beneath which his thin, almost repulsively red lips were visible. But if the man's mouth suggested cruelty, his eyes were unutterably evil. They were the eyes of a snake and not of a human being—small, bead-like, hard and glittering. Though not tall, he was a powerfully built man. His legs were short, but his arms long—like those of a gorilla.

Half-way up the hill, he turned quickly and faced East again.

"I don't know what you want with me!" he exclaimed. "What I do here is no affair of yours. I give you fair warning: if you pry into my affairs, you do so at your own risk."

"Indeed!" said East, who towered head and shoulders above the half-caste. "Don't let that worry you. I've lived for more than ten years in this country, and during that time I've risked my life more than once."

"You are not here on business?" asked Valletta.

"Neither business nor pleasure," said East; "just a sense of justice. I have some reason to suppose that you thrash your boys with a whip."

At once Matteo burst into laughter. Even in that light Bryan could see that the man's teeth were white as those of a negro

"All you English are the same!" he cried. "You pry into other people's affairs. If occasionally I use a whip, why shouldn't I?"

"Lead on," said East. "We'll talk it out inside."

From the half-open doorway of the guest-

house a bright shaft of light penetrated the darkness. East himself was the first to cross the threshold, where he pulled up with a jerk, and called back to his son.

"Come here, Bryan!" he cried. "Here's something extraordinary!" Turning to the half-caste, he added, "You've strange guests, I see."

Bryan, passing through the doorway, found himself in a long room, furnished with a table and several chairs, all of which had been constructed of forest wood. Upon the table was a paraffin lamp; and as this was without a shade, the light was glaring, almost blinding. Seated cross-legged upon the very table itself, by the side of the lamp, was a hideous monstrosity that was evidently a human being, but which bore an almost equal resemblance to a monkey.

This individual could not have been more than three feet nine in height. He had a flat nose and a huge mouth, and his ears protruded like those of a bat. Except for a loin-cloth he was devoid of clothing. His forehead was low, and yet bulging, and smothered in wrinkles. It would be almost impossible to imagine anyone more hideous.

The moment East and his son entered the room this little creature sprang like a cat from the table to a corner where there was a rough sideboard, beneath which he crouched with a wild, hunted look in his eyes.

George East turned to Matteo, who now stood in the doorway.

"I must offer you my congratulations," said he. "I never knew that it was possible to tame an Obongo pygmy."

Matteo smiled, again showing his white teeth.

"He does not look tame," he admitted; "but then he is frightened of you. He and I are on the best of terms. His name is Kamap, which means, I believe, 'the fox.'"

"Do you know, Bryan," said East, turning to his son, "I have never even seen an Obongo in my life. They are the rarest pygmy tribe in all the continent—as cunning and as clever as the Batwa, and every bit as cruel."

As East spoke he moved towards the pygmy, who at once took alarm, running like a rat to the far end of the room. East, seeing that he had made a mistake, turned to the half-caste.

"Tell him not to be afraid," said he. "I've no wish to hurt him. Nor would I trust him

out of my sight, unless I wanted a poisoned arrow between the shoulder blades."

Though George East—as he had said—may not have cared to trust the pygmy out of his sight, he had for a moment, when speaking to the half-caste, actually turned away from the little native. And when he again looked towards the end of the room, lo and behold, the Obongo had vanished!

"Gone!" he gasped. "I never saw him go. Where has he got to?"

"I saw nothing," said Bryan. "But he's certainly no longer here."

Both turned in amazement towards Matteo Valletta. The half-caste looked more evil than ever. The expression upon his face was little short of venomous. It resembled that of a frightened cat.

"Can you explain this?" asked East. "Where has he got to?"

"I explain nothing," said Matteo quietly. "I merely repeat my warning—you have come here at your own risk. I advise you, for your own welfare, to go back to your canoe and return to Balonga."

East was silent a moment.

"I will stay," said he, "if for no better reason than because you want me to go. You've something here you don't want me to find out. That's clear as daylight. I'm going to ask you a plain question, and I want a straight answer."

"Ask what you like," the other snarled.

"I've some reason to believe that you are capable of influencing the natives by means of hypnotism. What have you to say to that?"

For the better part of a minute Matteo never answered. He stood face to face with East, looking the Englishman straight in the eyes. Then he turned away with a sneer.

"That's true," said he. "It's not a crime. I'm here to trade with the forest natives. I can use what methods I like. I have now a man at Talai who is as much the servant of my will-power as this—my own right hand."

He held out his right hand, palm uppermost, in front of East and shook it violently. He had raised his voice almost to a shout.

"You have come here to learn things," he cried, "and learn you shall. You are responsible for what happens. Kamap, the pygmy, I cannot mesmerize. I have tried, and I have found it impossible. He is too timid, too shy. But I

have in this place a man who is six feet in height, who belongs to one of the wildest of the forest tribes. His name is Lubanshi. Very well, you shall see the power that I wield. Wait, and he will come."

Whilst talking, he had paced rapidly up and down the room. He now stood stock-still, upright, and took in a deep breath, for a moment closing his eyes. When he opened them he did not appear to see either East or Bryan. He might have been looking clean through the wall.

Father and son regarded the man in amazement. Bryan was conscious of feeling afraid. It was as if the stifling atmosphere itself was the very essence of mystery. He could not explain the sudden and singular disappearance of the pygmy. He was alarmed at the sinister appearance of the man who stood before him. And presently, there stumbled into the room one who was a veritable giant—a negro, huge and hideous, whose skin was stained with soot and palm-oil and streaked with red camwood powder, who trembled in every limb.

The new-comer stood in the doorway gazing about him like one not wholly awakened from

sleep. Suddenly the man set eyes upon Matteo Valletta, and at once, as if shot, he fell down upon his knees, throwing out both hands in the attitude of one who pleads for mercy.

Matteo never moved. He stood rigid and motionless, looking down upon the kneeling figure at his feet. Then on a sudden, and for no apparent reason, he became like one possessed His whole face lit up as if in a fury. His features became contorted. He turned rapidly and snatched down a whip which had been hanging upon a peg on the wall.

" You dog ! " he cried. " You black, painted cur-dog ! "

He raised the whip high above his head to strike ; but the lash never fell. For George East struck him with his fist—a blow that caught him between the cheek-bone and the ear. And Valletta pitched forward as a frog might jump into a pool, and lay face downward, stretched at his full length upon the floor.

The painted savage looked about him with wild, restless eyes. Then, with great difficulty, he staggered to his feet, looked at East and timidly extended a hand, touching the Englishman lightly upon the arm.

"'Master!' cried the savage, 'Oh, we will all die for this!'"

"Master!" he cried. "Oh, we will all die for this!"

East, taking the fellow by both shoulders, shook him gently.

"Yes," said he. "I'm your master now, but neither you nor I will die. Come, have courage! There's no cause to be afraid."

Valletta, still lying upon the ground, let out a groan. And then, from immediately beneath their feet there came a noise that was like the rolling of distant thunder—a crashing, roaring sound, as if upon a sudden some great structure had collapsed.

Bryan East looked at his father. A cold shiver ran like water down his back.

CHAPTER II

LUBANSHI'S STORY

"WHAT'S that ?" cried Bryan.

"It was under the ground," said East.

The noise had rapidly died down. It had resembled, in some respects, the sound of a breaking wave. It had begun gradually, swelling into a roar, which lasted for no longer than a few seconds.

"Under the ground!" repeated Bryan, in amazement. "What can be there ?"

"We'll find that out," said East, who strode to the far end of the room, to the place where they had last seen Kamap, the Obongo dwarf, and carefully examined the floor.

"Here we are!" he cried. "A trap-door—sure as sunrise—which accounts for the disappearance of the pygmy."

Bryan was on his way to join his father at the other end of the room, when Matteo, coming to his senses with surprising suddenness, sprang to his feet and placed himself between father and son.

"You can't go there!" he cried.

"Why not?"

"Because—I say so."

"That means you've something under the floor that you don't wish me to see," said East. "I told you I came here to find out all I could. Bryan, light that lantern which stands upon the sideboard."

Thereupon the conduct of Matteo Valletta became that of a madman. He seized a large bread-knife that lay upon the dresser, and with this in his hand he rushed frantically at East.

Without doubt, then and there, he would have stabbed the Englishman to the heart, had not his wrist been caught in the nick of time. He was a strong man, but he found himself held, as in a steel vice, by one who was far stronger than he.

The struggle that took place occupied no more than the fraction of a minute. Almost at once Matteo was forced to his knees; then his wrists were twisted, so that he let out a cry of pain, and the knife fell from his hand.

East then tied Valletta's hands behind his back with the long lash of the whip; and there was something of irony in the circumstance that

the man should have been bound with the very instrument with which he was wont to torture his unfortunate natives. As a finishing touch East tied the half-breed's feet together with a dish-cloth.

"Now then," said the Englishman, "for the time being we have nothing to fear from him. It remains to be seen what we can find under the floor."

The room was carpeted with long reeds gathered upon the river bank and dried in the sun; and these would have been quite sufficient to screen a small trap-door, about three feet square, to which was attached a round metal ring, had it not been that the pygmy, in escaping, had disarranged the reeds, so that the iron ring was visible.

Opening the trap-door, they beheld at their feet a roughly made wooden ladder, descending into the darkness of a vault or cellar. Bryan had lighted the lantern, which he gave to his father, who was the first to descend. The boy followed, as he disappeared casting a glance at the two inmates of the room: Lubanshi, the painted savage, still standing in the doorway, shivering in every limb, and Matteo Valletta,

bound hand and foot, his eyes ablaze, his white teeth tightly clenched.

Father and son found themselves in a large chamber about the same size as the room above ; and when East lifted the lantern above his head, they beheld a spectacle that held them rooted in astonishment.

The walls and the floor of the vault were of plastered mud, exuding moisture that came apparently from the river. The place swarmed with frogs and lizards, and there were also several gaily coloured beetles crawling here and there upon the floor. The place was about ten feet in height, and at one end was an enormous pile of elephant tusks, which looked snow-white in the light of the lantern. All this ivory must have been worth several thousand pounds ; and there, seated cross-legged on the very top of it all, was Kamap, the Obongo pygmy, glancing right and left—like a terrified monkey caught in a trap.

The noise that they had heard was now explained. The elephant tusks had been carefully stacked one on top of the other ; and Kamap, scrambling to the top in the darkness, had brought the whole heap crashing to the ground.

"What does this mean?" Bryan whispered to his father.

"It means mischief," said East. "I can guess the truth. Our friend Matteo has been doing business on his own account. You may take it for granted that this is his private store of ivory. But you had best run up the ladder and have a look at him. I don't trust the man out of my sight."

Bryan returned to the ladder and stealthily ascended, rung by rung. As he approached the top he exercised even greater caution, lifting his head very slowly until he was just able to peer above the level of the floor. And at once he beheld further evidence of the sinister and terrible power wielded by Matteo Valletta. He had arrived only in the nick of time.

Valletta stood in the place where they had left him, with his back to the wall, his feet tied together and his hands bound behind his back. He was not looking in the direction of the trap-door. His face was turned towards the doorway, and his eyes were fixed steadily upon the trembling figure of the savage, Lubanshi.

It was manifest that the man was hypnotized. Once again he had fallen under the

influence of the will of the half-breed. Coming slowly forward, with knees that actually knocked one against the other, he appeared to be unable to move his eyes from those of the mesmerist. Abject terror was stamped upon his features; his mouth was open, his eyes wide and staring.

When Lubanshi had drawn quite close to him, Matteo spoke for the first time. His voice was little above a whisper, and yet his tones were those of one who gives orders, who expects immediate and implicit obedience. He used the same native language in which he had spoken to the man before.

"Untie my hands," said he.

Lubanshi never hesitated. Matteo twisted round his body, but still looked straight into the negro's eyes, which were not more than a few inches from his own. Bryan noticed that Lubanshi's hands were trembling violently. For all that, he had actually begun to untie the knots in the lash of the whip, when the boy rushed forward with a loud cry, and thrust himself between them.

"Stand back!" he cried in English—he was too excited to realize that the man could not

understand him. "Stand back! We are not to be fooled so easily."

If a glance could have killed, Bryan East had dropped dead upon the instant. There was murder in Matteo's eyes. An expression of unutterable hatred, of disappointment and thirst for vengeance was stamped upon his evil face. The boy realized then, for the first time, the power of Matteo; and he was conscious of a feeling of intense relief when the tall figure of his father came forth from the vault. And, moreover, East brought with him Kamap, the pygmy, whom he held by the scruff of the neck.

In a few breathless words the boy told his father what had happened. East, still keeping a firm hold upon the pygmy, went to the door of the hut and locked it, putting the key in his pocket. Then he seated himself upon a chair, resting one of his great hands upon the table, with the fingers of the other hand closed about the neck of Kamap, who looked as if he believed his last hour had come.

Matteo still stood with his back to the wall, immediately in front of East. Bryan took another chair, at the end of the table. Lubanshi

was between them. Suddenly, as if he were tired, the savage subsided to the floor, assuming a sitting position with his legs crossed in front of him.

"Now," said East, addressing himself to Valletta, "I'm going to tell you what I think of you."

He appeared to be in no haste. He took his pipe from his pocket, very deliberately filled it with tobacco, and lighted it from the paraffin lamp. Though he had now released the pygmy, he kept a close watch upon him.

"That room below explains itself," he began, directing the mouthpiece of his pipe at Matteo. "You are employed by the Company to trade with the natives, and in addition to a salary you receive a commission. This is not enough for you. To whom does all that ivory belong? Not to the Company, or you would never have hidden it. It belongs to yourself, and you know that private trading is forbidden. In other words, I accuse you of being a thief. What have you to say?"

Valletta smiled sourly.

"Were I at liberty to do so," he answered, "I would snap my fingers in your face. You

can accuse me of what you like, you have no proof whatever. I refuse to tell you anything at all."

"That will make no difference," East cut in. "I'll find out all I want to, sooner or later."

He rose from his chair, crossed the room to the half-breed, and untied his hands and feet.

"I set you free," said he. "In a few minutes I shall return to Balonga. The pygmy you can keep. I don't want him. He reminds me of an evil spirit and you are welcome to him. But as for this poor fellow," he continued, pointing to Lubanshi, "I take him with me to Balonga."

"You do nothing of the kind," cried Matteo, again livid with rage, and trembling visibly from passion.

"I'm as good as my word," said East, very quietly. "I take this man back with me to my own factory for two reasons: firstly, in the interests of humanity he cannot remain here to be mesmerized and thrashed by you; and secondly, I have an idea that as soon as we become friends he will be able to give me certain information which I have not been able to find out for myself."

Matteo raised his voice almost to a shout.

"Take that man away from here at your peril!" he cried.

"At my peril," said East, without emotion.

And thereupon he bade Lubanshi rise to his feet and led the man through the doorway, followed by his son.

A few minutes later they were again seated in their canoe, and were being paddled upstream by their canoemen. Not until they were some distance away, and the light of the camp-fire at Talai had vanished behind the trees, did Bryan speak.

"The whole thing," said he, "was like a nightmare."

"Something worse than that, Bryan," answered East. "That man's the devil himself. No one knows what atrocities he has committed, of what brutalities he is capable. For myself, I believe that every one of those great tusks of ivory has cost blood and tears and misery unbelievable to the ignorant, misguided people of the forest."

And while the canoe was forging ahead against the strength of the current, Matteo Valletta, in the red light of the camp-fire, paced

to and fro upon the narrow bamboo jetty of the factory of Talai. Suddenly, he came to a standstill and shook his fist in the direction of the canoe.

"A thousand curses on you!" he cried. "If you learn the truth from Lubanshi, I swear that neither you nor your boy will live a week."

It was long after sunrise when East and Bryan disembarked at Balonga. Towards the early hours of morning both Bryan and Lubanshi had fallen asleep in the canoe. The native, especially, seemed to be utterly exhausted.

George East himself, however, kept wide awake throughout the journey. Seated in the canoe with his rifle across his knees, he remained alert, ever watchful, his sharp eyes glancing from one bank to the other. At the same time he constantly regarded the motionless form of the forest native, who lay stretched at his full length in the bows.

The man belonged to a tribe of which East had never heard, one of the wild races that inhabit the interior of the Great Forest, who know nothing of civilization, whose lives are circumscribed by black ignorance and superstition. The majority of these people are canni-

bals. They are in a stage of human evolution little above the beasts.

And yet, physically, Lubanshi was in some respects a magnificent type of savage. He was tall, broad of shoulder and strongly made. But his thick lips, receding forehead and chin, and flat nose left little doubt that, so far as intelligence was concerned, he belonged to an exceedingly low order of the human race. In place of clothes he was adorned with red camwood powder, not only upon his face but also upon his chest and back.

At Balonga East gave the man a hut to share with Wanyani, the native who had deserted from Matteo's factory. Lubanshi was given as much food as he could eat—and there is no surer way to the heart of a savage than through his stomach.

One morning East went to the man's hut, seated himself cross-legged in the doorway, in the native fashion, took out his pipe, and lit it.

The savage knew no more than a few words of the language spoken by the natives upon the Warimi River. For years, however, East had bartered with the wild men of the forest on behalf of the Company whose servant he was.

Suddenly, they fell to talking together. They

talked until late in the afternoon—and all they talked about was *food!*

Perceptibly, Lubanshi gathered confidence; he smiled constantly; he grinned from ear to ear. But when East spoke of Talai and Matteo Valletta, the man at once began to tremble.

The Englishman assured him that he had nothing to fear. He said that he had taken Lubanshi under his own personal protection, and that if he served him faithfully it would be to their mutual advantage. And in the end, George East got the truth out of the man; he received intelligence so amazing that he found it difficult to believe.

Lubanshi's tribe was called the "Red Tribe." Periodically they were cannibals, although that horrid practice was strictly forbidden by their witch-doctors. They inhabited a hilly district in the interior of the Forest, beyond a country which Lubanshi described as the "Region of Fire." He said that his people were always at war with the Obongo pygmies. Sometimes the pygmies were victorious, sometimes the tribesmen. He hated the Obongo.

Now, the chief of the Red Tribe was a powerful man. He was feared throughout the Great

Forest by all save the Obongo pygmies. In the land inhabited by the Red Tribe there was a waterfall, where the water descended a cliff which was studded with innumerable red stones. The chief himself had a great box filled entirely with these stones, many of which were as large as ground-nuts.

Matteo Valletta, the agent of Talai, had heard rumours of all this; and he had sent for his friend, Kamap, the pygmy chieftain, who was an evil man—as evil as Matteo himself.

Lubanshi was the head-man of one of the villages of the Red Tribe. One evening, when he was alone in the woods, he had been surrounded by a score of pygmies, who were under the command of Kamap himself. Lubanshi, knowing that the pygmies fought with poisoned spears and arrows, believed that his last hour had come; but to his surprise he was taken prisoner and not put to death. He was taken upon a long journey through the woods, until at last he arrived at the factory of Talai.

When Matteo Valletta saw the red stone which Lubanshi wore strung upon a leather string around his neck, he behaved like one demented. His eyes glittered; he danced: he

laughed loudly, and clapped his hands as children do when they play.

At that, George East interrupted the man's narrative, asking him by means of signs and the few words they had in common what manner of stones were these that had so excited the cupidity of Valletta. And thereupon the negro did a very extraordinary thing. He looked at East for a moment as if in doubt; then he grinned from ear to ear; and lowering his head, shook it from side to side until a red stone, almost the size of a broad-bean seed, fell from one of his widely-distended nostrils.

East was at first too amazed even to look at the stone. He had heard of natives at Kimberley swallowing diamonds, but he had never heard of a stone being hidden in a man's nose. Lubanshi afterwards explained that he had regarded this stone as one of his most valuable possessions and had stuffed it up his nose the moment he saw that he was surrounded by the pygmies.

For a moment East examined the stone itself, and then jumped to his feet.

In the house he found Bryan reading.

"My boy," he cried, "I've learnt something that I never knew before."

"What's that?"

"There are rubies in Africa!" said East. "And what's more, you and I are going to find them for ourselves. In two months my time's up; but before we return to England I'm going to journey into the very heart of the forest, and you are coming with me."

"To look for rubies?" Bryan asked.

"To find them," said his father. "However, I will take no leaf from Matteo's book. I will steal nothing, not even from ignorant, misguided savages. But I have an idea that it will not be difficult to persuade the chief of the Red Tribe, who is Lubanshi's lord and master, to give us in exchange for barter goods enough rubies to make us rich men for the rest of our lives."

Bryan had never seen his father so excited. East was pacing to and fro in the room.

"For two months," he cried, "we must wait in patience. And then, I'm a free man; and we journey together into the wilderness. There'll be dangers on every side of us—painted cannibals and savage dwarfs; and you and I will see the stars from places where no white man has ever been before. But we'll go, Bryan—you and I!"

CHAPTER III

IN THE WIZARD'S POWER

THE natives of the Congo basin comprise some of the most superstitious peoples in the world. They believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, but to all intents and purposes they have no religion ; for the implicit faith they have in their witch-doctors, and their belief in fetish and "taboo," have nothing to do with God.

At East's factory at Balonga there were two natives who had escaped from Talai, both of whom had been subjected to the hypnotic influence of the sinister agent of the lower trading station. Both of these men can be vaguely classed as Congo savages ; yet they were entirely different from one another in several important particulars. Lubanshi was a negro of the bush, physically a splendid specimen of the human race, but of an extremely low order of intelligence. Wanyani, on the other hand, was a riverine man, who had had experience of Euro-

peans, who had even seen steamboats on the main river, and whose ordinary diet was fish which he was able to catch in the most ingeniously made traps, not unlike large lobster-pots.

Lubanshi had probably never tasted fish in his life. His tribe lived in the very heart of the jungle, many miles from the nearest tributary. He was a hunter, killing antelope, bush-pigs and bush-rats, as well as elephants.

Lubanshi declared that if he guided the white man and his son to his own country, a certain number of the red stones might be exchanged for articles which in his opinion were of far greater value—namely, brass rods, glass beads, tin plates and penny looking-glasses. He promised faithfully to do this and to remain loyal to them, if the Englishman would protect him from the dreaded agent at Talai. Comfortably settled at Balonga, Lubanshi seemed to have shaken off the influence of Matteo ; but this was far from the case with Wanyani, the river man.

It may have been that Wanyani had many months previously fallen under the domination of the will-power of Valletta. In the opinion of East's natives, the man was undoubtedly possessed by an evil spirit; and there was nothing to be

done but to summon the services of a witch-doctor, who would demand a fee of about five hundred brass rods, since the evil spirit was unquestionably a powerful one. The witch-doctor would make a fetish; he would probably fashion an image in wood, which he would hollow out and fill with all sorts of magical rubbish, such as leopards' claws, the feathers of birds, small pieces of elephant hide, beans, nuts and sugar-cane wine. Over this fetish he would cast a spell, and he would then sell the fetish to the unfortunate Wanyani.

Wanyani would then beat the fetish with a stick, shouting at it all night long, telling it to order the evil spirit to come out of him and go to the witch-doctor. And the next morning, the witch-doctor would arrive with the glad tidings that he had caught the evil spirit and had safely bottled him up in a saucepan! For which kind office he would demand a further payment in brass rods or anything else in Wanyani's possession that he might happen to covet—his cooking-utensils or his fishing-nets. Such an example serves to illustrate the character of the simple-minded and ignorant people with whom George East had to deal.

In this particular case Wanyani *did* summon a witch-doctor, a toothless old man of over seventy years of age, who deprived him of nearly all his personal belongings and did him not the least good in the world. Not until the witch-doctor had failed did East broach the subject to Wanyani.

"Is the evil spirit still with you, Wanyani?" he asked.

"Yes," said the native. "It is the evil spirit that has come out of the Wizard of Talai. The heart of the white man has broken loose and entered into my soul. My eyes are covered with cobwebs, and I cannot see where I am going."

These were quite common native expressions with which the Englishman was well acquainted. He listened attentively, and bowed his head as in approval.

"What you say is true," said he, "except that you refer to Matteo Valletta as a white man. Now, I am a white man, and I do not belong to the same tribe as he does. That is what you natives will never understand. You think that all the white men belong to one tribe; and that is not so. Like you, we have good tribes and bad tribes; some more civilized than others, some

more skilful in both peace and war. Now, if you like to think so, the agent of Talai has certainly bewitched you; but no medicine-man or witch-woman will ever cast out the evil spirit. It is necessary for you to go right away from this place, and you will soon forget all about it. Now, in a short time my son and I are going to undertake an expedition into the forest. Would you like to come with us? If you do, you will soon forget all about him whom you call the Wizard of Talai."

Wanyani shivered from head to foot.

"Into the forest!" he exclaimed in horror.

"We go upon a journey of several months," said East, "travelling both on foot and by canoe. Lubanshi returns to his own tribe in the far distant Region of Fire, of which you may have heard; and I have arranged to go with him."

"Master," said Wanyani, "I cannot journey in the forest. Were I to do so I would be bewitched by the bush-spirits."

East laughed aloud, hoping to ridicule the man's fears.

"Are my son and I afraid of these bush-spirits?" he asked.

"You are different," said Wanyani. "You

are white men and gods. You have lived on the earth before, and you have returned to the world with all the knowledge of the Cloud Folk."

East sighed. He had often experienced the impossibility of persuading a native against his will.

"Have it your own way, Wanyani," he replied. "I'm sorry. I wanted to help you."

He had already received a letter by canoe, containing the news that his successor, a Belgian, had arrived at Matadi, at the mouth of the main river, and might soon be expected at Balonga. East and Bryan had already made all the necessary preparations. They had loaded a long canoe with a great quantity of barter goods, supplies and ammunition. They had seen that their medicine chest contained such drugs as they might want.

That same night a canoe ascended the river and drew alongside the jetty at Balonga. And a moment later Matteo Valletta stepped ashore.

East met him half-way between the house and the river bank.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"For palaver," said Matteo, using a native expression.

The Englishman smiled. "I know the native custom well enough," said he: "that those who attend a palaver do so fully armed. That may be a custom on the Congo but it is not the way with Europeans. If you will come into my room and lay your revolver on the table, I promise I will do the same. And we can talk as man to man."

"Nothing more simple," said Matteo. "I desire to be friends."

"Now then," said East a minute later, when they were seated opposite one another, "state your case as briefly as you can. Why am I honoured by this visit?"

"You have here," said Matteo in his broken English, "two men who belong to my factory. The one is a bush-native of the name of Lubanshi, and the other is a river-man called Wanyani. I desire to take them back with me to Talai."

"In regard to Lubanshi," answered East, "I have a shrewd suspicion what you want him for. I beg to remind you that he is a free man and not a slave; and if he were a slave, he belongs neither to you nor to me. The same remarks apply to Wanyani. He dragged himself here

half flayed alive by the lash of your whip. He came to me for protection, and I look upon it as my duty to protect him."

Matteo thought for a moment. His hands were folded in front of him upon the table. His dark, evil eyes shifted restlessly about the room. He appeared to be thinking.

"You say these are free men," he admitted. "Then they should be free to choose for themselves. Will you agree to this; that they are brought here, and allowed to do just as they choose—to return to Talai with me, or to remain here with you?"

East rose to his feet, and standing at his great height looked down upon the half-caste.

"I see your game," said he. "You know that you can exercise your infernal hypnotic powers over them. How can they be free to choose when you have deprived them of the little will-power they possess?"

Matteo smiled.

"You refuse to summon them?" he asked.

"Yes," said East. "I do."

"Very well, then," said Matteo. "I will show you how powerless you are. You are aware, perhaps, that these people call me the

Wizard of Talai. I am more feared than their own witch-doctors. You shall see."

At that the man turned down the lamp. He closed his eyes ; and there followed a long silence —a silence that was tense, so great that one might have heard a pin drop in the room.

Matteo breathed deeply, his chest rising and falling. East stared at him in amazement. A minute passed—five minutes—ten. And then—a figure stumbled across the threshold of the room ; and Wanyani flung himself at the feet of Valletta.

" My master ! " he cried, " I am come back : the heart has returned to the soul. Wanyani is your slave, the slave of the Wizard of Talai."

Valletta threw back his head and burst into the loudest laughter.

" You see," he cried to East, " I am master here ! "

George East clenched a fist and struck the table such a blow that he caused the lamp to jump.

" Begone with you ! " he cried. " And Heaven have mercy on the poor wretches in your power ! "

Matteo walked straight to his canoe. So

far as East was aware, he never spoke another word to the miserable native who followed at his heels like a dog.

East's heart was heavy. Though the best years of his life had been spent in that savage country, and he had seen cannibalism and a thousand nameless horrors, he was not by any means callous in regard to the sufferings of the natives. He had won the affection of his own "boys"; and though he was by no means blind to the many faults to be found in the negro character, he could sympathize with, and was sincerely fond of, these simple-hearted people.

Presently he was joined by Bryan, who came from the direction of the native village further up the beach.

"Was that Matteo's canoe?" asked the boy.

"It was, indeed," said his father. "He came here, and he has gone back to Talai, taking Wanyani with him. Bryan, the sooner we leave this place the better. Matteo is only one in a hundred. There are too many so-called Europeans in this country who are a disgrace to civilization."

Two weeks later East's relief arrived, a corpulent, clean-shaven Belgian who had been

working for five or six years on the lower river and who had little or no experience of the interior.

George East handed over the factory, and was delighted to find that his successor was a jovial, kind-hearted man who was not likely to abuse his powers. Finally, the Englishman thought it best to warn the Belgian of what manner of man was the agent in charge of the lower factory at Talai.

In the meantime Matteo Valletta had not been idle. He had gone up to Balonga with an object in view : to secure either Wanyani or Lubanshi. He would have preferred to have returned with them both ; but the river-man was enough for his purpose.

Wanyani was brought back to Talai in fear and trembling. He was locked up for a whole day. And then he was led before the agent, who sat with folded arms in his sitting-room, leaning upon the table, upon which squatted cross-legged like a heathen idol the hideous pygmy chief. Before Matteo upon the table lay his long dog-whip, the lash twisted around the handle.

" You will speak the truth," said Matteo,

frowning at his victim. "You deserted from my camp. Why did you do so?"

The half-breed had raised his voice almost to a shout. His eyes flashed. The unfortunate native shivered in front of him as if from cold.

"I was afraid of the whip," he faltered.

"Fool!" cried Matteo.

Sheer terror drove the unhappy negro to his knees. Matteo had jumped to his feet, waving the whip above his head. Kamap, the pygmy, grinned from ear to ear, but never moved.

"Mercy!" shrieked Wanyani. "Have mercy, my master! I will speak the truth."

Matteo smiled. Slowly, as if reluctantly, he returned the whip to the table, seated himself, and again folded his arms.

"It is now six weeks," he began, "since you went to Balonga. Tell me, what has the white man told you?"

"He asked me to join an expedition into the forest," said Wanyani; "but I refused to accompany him, because I know the forest is bewitched."

"That's better!" exclaimed the agent, showing his white teeth like a vicious dog. "Now

we are going to hear something worth hearing. Where did he say he was going ? "

" To the Region of Fire," faltered the native.

Matteo let out an oath between his teeth and then turned to the pygmy, to whom he spoke in the Obongo tongue.

" They have found us out ! " he whispered. " They have discovered the secret from Lubanshi."

" It makes little difference," said Kamap, grinning still. " The Obongo do not fear the Red Tribesmen. I will gather together my warriors, and Lulawanga, where the Red Tribesmen live, shall be burnt to the ground, and there will be plunder and loot and dancing."

" Lubanshi himself is going upon this journey ? " asked Matteo, turning again to Wanyani.

His eyes were now so bright that they were like coals of fire.

" Lubanshi has promised to guide them," Wanyani confessed.

It was plain to see that although the man betrayed the secrets of the Englishman he did so against his will—only because he stood in abject fear of the whip.

"They will never get there!" shouted Matteo, "because, Kamap, you and I will follow on their trail! I tell you truly, we white men prize more highly these red stones than rubber and ivory by the ton. You are the head of a powerful tribe, a tribe far more cunning than Lubanshi's people. Your men fight with poisoned arrows; they make traps of sharp stakes hidden by leaves upon the forest paths. You and I have made blood-brotherhood together; we have mingled the blood in our veins, and therefore we are pledged to be friends."

"We are blood-brothers," said the pygmy.

"Your enemies are my enemies," cried Matteo, "and my enemies are yours. I tell you, we will wage war against the Red Tribesmen; we will slay the Englishman and his son; and you and your people can take as many slaves as you want. Tell me, is that a bargain?"

"It is a bargain," said the pygmy. "The Englishmen shall die."

"Then," said Matteo, "there is no time to lose. They may leave at any moment. I want you to cross the river in a canoe, to travel upstream along the bank through the bush. You will be able to hide amid the thickets opposite

Balonga. You are skilled in woodcraft and will take care that nobody sees you. When the Englishman goes up-stream, come back here with the news. Observe how many men he has taken with him, and how he and his son are armed."

"It will take me a day to get there," said the pygmy. "The forest is dense."

"A day or so makes little or no difference," said Matteo. "They can have a week's start, if they like. You and I do not wish to overtake them until we can join hands with your people in the forest."

Kamap appeared to be thinking.

"Tell me," he asked, "are these red stones worth more than looking-glasses?"

Valletta burst into laughter.

"In Europe," said he, "the price of one of the smallest would buy thousands of looking-glasses, brass rods and beads."

"Then," said Kamap, "when the Obongo have conquered the Red Tribe there will be a great feast, and you shall have as many of the red stones as you like; for they are of no use to us."

"It is agreed," said Matteo. "I follow the Englishman, even if he journeys as far as the

Great Lakes, to the deserts of the north or to the mountains of the south. I swear to you that he shall die."

Before daybreak the following morning, Kamap, the pygmy chief, crossed the river in a canoe and set forward through the forest, following a route that lay parallel to the river. He advanced cautiously, and yet rapidly. The undergrowth was so dense and tangled that there were places where a full-grown man could not have passed; but Kamap, wriggling his body as if he were a snake, squeezed himself between the strong rope-like stems of creepers and beneath thorn-trees, the sharp spikes of which had little effect upon his tough, nut-brown hide.

Late that afternoon he arrived before Balonga; and as he crouched behind the trunk of a tree, he saw a canoe moored to the jetty opposite.

In this canoe were six river-men, each of whom held a paddle in his hand. And presently George East and his son came from the factory, both with rifles under their arms.

They were accompanied as far as the river bank by the fat Belgian, who was now the agent of Balonga. As they approached, the painted figure of Lubanshi appeared from the shadow

of a wild fig-tree, and followed close upon the heels of the white men.

Lubanshi was armed as if for war. His body was newly smeared with camwood powder and oil. He carried in his right hand his fighting spear, and in his left a long shield made of elephant hide. Slung upon his back was a bundle of spears, similar to the one he carried, and his girdle was crammed with knives.

In the red light of the dying sun, the warrior presented such a spectacle as might have frightened anyone who knew nothing of the ways of this dark and savage country. He was a man six feet in height, strong and long of limb, painted red for war—from head to foot he was red in the glowing sunlight. And moreover, he was brave; he was one who neither asked for mercy nor gave it. He could hurl his spears with such accuracy of aim that he could split a plaintain stalk in half at a distance of sixty feet. He was a cannibal, too, with more barbarous and horrid customs than it would be meet to explain.

And yet, the pygmy chuckled; for he knew his own strength and the strength of his tribe. Lubanshi's courage would be at a discount when the Obongo were on the war-path, travelling

silently by night through the density of the African bush, with their arrows smeared with such a deadly poison that he who was wounded died within a few minutes in terrible pain.

Upon the jetty, the Belgian shook hands with George East and his son.

" The good God be with you ! " he exclaimed.

And Kamap heard, though unable to understand.

A little later the long canoe shot out to mid-stream, and at once the native paddlers took up a chorus that they sang lustily in unison. It was a wild song about a kite and a tortoise, who made blood-brotherhood together, to which the tortoise was faithful, though the kite proved a traitor.

In the cool of the evening, with a white mist spreading upon that lonely, unexplored river, and myriads of insects droning in the air, the canoe swept up-stream against the current; and Bryan East realized that he was journeying into the very heart of the Unknown, into a savage and mysterious land where no white man had ever been before.

CHAPTER IV

INTO THE UNKNOWN

ABOVE the factory of Balonga, the Warimi was unexplored. It was one of those mysterious rivers that are marked upon modern maps by means of a series of dots, signifying that their exact whereabouts is a matter of mere conjecture.

From the very start of the journey progress was necessarily slow; and it became slower day by day since, as they ascended the stream, the current became more swift.

The canoe-men were expert paddlers who had been specially selected for the work. They were fishermen who had spent their entire lives upon the river; and there were few who had not a certain number of scars upon their arms or legs. For, he who wades knee-deep in the waters of an African river is very likely, sooner or later, to be mauled by a crocodile.

For many miles the river was broad and the current not so strong that the canoe-men were

unable to make tolerable progress. These good fellows sang lustily as they paddled, Lubanshi in the bows beating a wooden drum. There was a two-fold object in this : he gave the time to the canoe-men, and he warned any villages that might lie upon either bank that they came in peace. On the Congo rivers, if a canoe approaches in silence, it is taken for granted that the occupants mean war ; and if they endeavour to land, they run the risk of being speared to death. Every twenty minutes, at a given signal, the canoe-men changed their paddles from one side of the canoe to the other. Thus they were able to cover long distances without pausing to rest.

They came often to large pools where the river widened out and where the water was comparatively shallow. Here, invariably, there were large schools of hippopotami, and crocodiles were also numerous. On one occasion they were actually attacked by a gigantic monster who was evidently exceedingly hungry, or he would never have resorted to such tactics.

They were swinging forward at a steady pace in the early hours of the morning. There was no sign of life upon the river, the surface of which was smooth as a mill-pond, when suddenly a

crocodile with huge gaping jaws arose out of the water alongside the canoe.

"Lean towards it!" shouted East, the very moment the snout of the reptile appeared above the surface.

Fortunately, not only Bryan and East himself, but one or two of the boys followed these instructions, throwing their weight towards the side of the canoe upon which was the crocodile, just as the crew of a racing yacht steady her as she veers round into the wind. The majority of the canoe-men, taken suddenly by surprise and considerably alarmed, had drawn away from the crocodile; and had everyone done the same thing, there is little doubt that the canoe would have turned turtle and the monster would have secured a victim.

As it was, the brute nearly succeeded in its object, for the canoe shipped a considerable quantity of water. The jaws of the crocodile clashed together within a few inches of Bryan's arm. East, however, acted without a moment's hesitation. Whipping his revolver from his opened holster, he aimed and pressed the trigger; and at once the brute began to sink slowly to the bottom.

There could be little doubt that upon this deserted river the crocodiles were particularly savage and daring. One night when they were camped upon a long, sandy beach another tragedy nearly befell them. One of the boys, whose name was Motu, had gone down-stream to set a fish-trap at a likely place, and as he had not returned by nightfall, East grew anxious about him and decided to go in search of the man, taking with him both Bryan and Lubanshi. The river-men would not leave the light of the camp-fire for fear of the bush-spirits which they were convinced swarmed in the neighbourhood.

East searched for some time without finding any trace of Motu, until at last his attention was attracted by a low, continuous moaning sound that came from the direction of a tree about fifty yards from the river bank. In the moonlight amid the branches of this tree he was able to make out the figure of the unhappy negro.

The man had waded into the water to set his fish-trap, and had at once been seized by a crocodile that drove its teeth deep into the calf of his leg. A violent struggle took place, the reptile endeavouring to drag the native into

the river, Motu fighting desperately to regain the safety of the shore. With admirable presence of mind he had driven both his thumbs into the crocodile's eyes, thereby causing the brute such pain that for a moment it released its hold, thus enabling him to escape.

The crocodile, however, which must have been at least twenty feet in length, having once tasted blood had savagely pursued him ; whereupon the negro had climbed a tree for safety. And there the monster remained, patiently waiting at the foot of the tree for the miserable man to descend, or for pure exhaustion to compel him to fall from his place of security.

And here again the crocodile got more than it bargained for. On hearing the approach of East and his companions, it turned, and was about to retreat hastily to the river. But the moon being both full and bright, Bryan East was quick to catch sight of the great reptile crawling rapidly across the sand. When the crocodile was not more than ten yards from the edge of the river, the boy's rifle flew to his shoulder and he fired.

The reptile immediately fell flat, to lie sprawled out upon the sand. Bryan, who had

not much experience of these horrid animals, naturally supposed that it was dead. Giving a wild shout of delight at having killed it—as he thought—so easily, he was about to rush forward when his father grasped him by an arm and forcibly held him back.

"Stand clear, Bryan!" he cried. "It's a hundred to one he's only stunned and may suddenly recover."

This proved to be no more than the truth; for even as he was speaking the crocodile regained consciousness, looked about it in a dazed manner, and then continued to crawl, more slowly than before, in the direction of the water.

East, however, had cut off its only possible line of retreat. He had waded into the water and now stood immediately in front of the animal, his loaded revolver in his hand. The brute was obviously frightened. It looked around as if seeking some way of escape. Lubanshi was on one side of it, Bryan on the other, and East in front. Crocodiles are really cowardly animals, and are especially so when they find themselves out of the water and face to face with an enemy.

The reptile probably realized that its only chance of success lay in "frightfulness," in terrifying its opponent. Approaching still nearer to East, it opened its huge jaws as widely as it could—with the result that it received a succession of revolver bullets clean down its throat, so that it instantly collapsed and lay this time stone dead upon the beach.

As for the native, when they got him down from the tree they found that the poor fellow had been terribly mauled. The calf of his right leg had been badly bitten. They carried him back to the bivouac, and there washed and dressed his wound. The ability of the negro to recover from such injuries is little short of marvellous. For two days Motu rested during the journey in the body of the canoe, but upon the third he was again paddling as vigorously as ever.

By that time they had gained the head waters of the Warimi, which was now narrower and more twisting. They soon came to rapids, where there were rocks in mid-stream. East, judging that a waterfall was in front of them, gave the order to land, so that they might cut a way for themselves through the bush, and carry the

canoe up-stream until they came to quieter water.

They passed the waterfall after five days of bush work, and were then glad enough of a full day's rest. They found themselves in a neighbourhood that was wonderfully picturesque. The river was so narrow, and the trees on either bank so gigantic, that there were places where the branches from each side actually met overhead, so that it was as if the stream flowed through a leafy tunnel. Here excellent fish were to be caught—far more agreeable to eat than the disgusting mud-fish that thrived upon the lower reaches.

During these weeks East had occupied himself learning the language of Lubanshi; and he knew enough words to be able to converse with the savage with tolerable ease. Lubanshi told him that he was now willing to leave the river and to strike inland towards the Region of Fire beyond which his tribe lived. The Englishman, however, had grave doubts as to whether his river negroes would follow him into the bush, and he therefore desired to make as much headway as he could before definitely leaving the valley of the Warimi. None the less, he fully

realized that he could not hold to the river for many days longer, as the current was now so strong that they could make no more than a few miles a day.

They were in a country that appeared to be uninhabited by human beings. For ten days they had not seen a native village, and the last had been no more than a few scattered huts very rudely made, thatched with palm-leaves and constructed of grass. Lubanshi no longer beat the drum. He informed them that they were in the country of the Obongo pygmies, and in consequence East and Bryan now took it in turns to keep a sharp look out from the bows of the canoe.

One morning Bryan, who was on watch, was prepared to swear that he had seen dark figures moving in the midst of the undergrowth on the right bank of the river, and immediately reported the circumstance to his father.

"Tell me where," said East. "But don't point, my lad! And don't look in that direction."

"There's a tree with silver bark," said Bryan, "rather like an English birch, only ever so much bigger. Well, about twenty yards above that,

where the thickets are quite dark, I believe I saw something moving."

For a moment George East fixed his eyes in the direction indicated. Then, suddenly, he gripped his rifle in his hands.

"You're right, Bryan!" he exclaimed.

And at that there came a sound that was like the loud humming of an insect; and an arrow flew from the river bank and buried its barbed point in the side of the canoe.

Lubanshi at once wrenched the arrow from the wood and looked at it.

"The Obongo!" he exclaimed.

As the word left his lips another arrow came singing past his head, to splash into the water beyond them.

East fired at once; and immediately the report of his rifle was answered by a scream from the river bank. A small figure was seen to stumble forth from the undergrowth beneath the forest trees. This—they were able to see—was a man who was not more than four feet in height. Staggering, he caught his foot in a snag that protruded from the water and pitched head-foremost into the stream.

A few seconds later they were attacked by

the Obongo in force. Scores of small black forms became visible here and there amongst the trees. Hideous little ape-men they were, very active in all their movements, who darted in and out of the thickets like so many rabbits. Every one of them was armed with bow and arrows, and several carried spears.

It was at once clear to George East that they must find cover with as little delay as possible. There were but two rifles in the canoe. Lubanshi, the Red Tribesman, had never used a firearm in his life. The canoe-men were armed with their war spears, but they could not use these and at the same time handle the canoe.

So far as they could judge they were attacked by forty or fifty pygmies ; and the situation was none of the pleasantest. The Englishman realized that very soon one or more of his men must be hit ; and since the pygmies' arrow-heads were certainly steeped in a deadly poison, there could be but little hope for him who was struck down, unless first-aid were given at once—a thing scarcely possible in the heat of action.

" Paddle for the opposite bank ! " cried East. " Paddle for your lives ! You'll be safe there

for the time being. We shall be able to find shelter behind the trunks of the trees."

The canoe-men, however, were wellnigh panic-stricken. Deaf to the orders of their leader, they picked up their paddles and shook them threateningly, as if they were clubs, towards their little enemies upon the river bank. East saw at once that if he could not establish a certain amount of discipline they would be slain piecemeal, one after the other, before they had gained the cover of the trees. To get the best out of his negroes at a time of such emergency he knew that he could do no better than jeer at them, for the African native is highly sensitive to ridicule.

"I thought you were warriors!" he cried in derision. "I've lived among you all these years and I believed you to be fighting men, like the Boloki of the Upper Congo. And behold, at the first arrow you are frightened of the small people of the woods! Obey my orders: paddle for the bank!"

These remarks had the desired effect. The natives drove their paddles into the water; and although they no longer worked in unison, they grounded the canoe against the opposite bank in the space of a few seconds.

Bryan East, springing ashore, made fast the painter of the canoe to a branch. The canoemen and Lubanshi were not slow to follow him, while East himself brought up the rear, firing repeatedly at the enemy across the river.

After that the combat was more equally balanced. The Obongo were quite capable of sending their arrows across the entire width of the stream, but as the forest trees were particularly close together nobody was hurt.

On the other hand, East and his son kept up a slow but continuous fire upon their enemies. East's object in doing this was more to show a bold front to the Obongo than with any idea of reducing their numbers, for the pygmies were just as invisible as themselves.

However, the pygmy races are not only cunning and resourceful, but they will not accept defeat. Moreover, they had some incentive to fight more gallantly than usual; for they had seen in the canoe a great pile of boxes and bales covered over with a tarpaulin, which they knew well to contain barter goods.

Besides, they were commanded in person by Kamap, their acknowledged chief, whom they knew to be wise beyond his generation. And

had not Kamap a white man to counsel him? They had heard often of the white men, who they had been told were brave, and against whom it was sheer madness for the wild forest tribes to declare war. And yet, Kamap's white man took no part in the fighting. He remained in the forest, as if anxious not to show himself to his enemies.

For Matteo Valletta had followed up-stream, journeying to the very foot of the rapids in a large canoe which could accommodate as many as twenty paddlers. Thence he had sent his canoe-men back to Talai, while he and Kamap travelled together through the darkness of the woods.

The pygmy chief was now in his own country. He knew of many hidden paths and short cuts; he knew where lay the tracks of wild animals; and they soon passed East and his men, still toiling up-stream against the current.

One night the war-drum had sounded in the pygmy encampment. From all directions the little warriors had gathered together at the summons of their chief. A palaver had been held, when they had been told that a white man's party was travelling up the river, and if they

succeeded in capturing them, there would be plunder for all.

Of a certainty he whom the natives called the Wizard of Talai had not been slow to act. The white men had been found—but as yet, they were far from being captured.

"My master," said Kamap, "it looks as if they have escaped; we have no means of crossing the water."

"How wide is the stream?" asked Matteo.

"An arrow from a strong bow will just carry across," the other answered.

"Tell me this," said the half-breed. "Can your men shoot with their arrows a parrot perched upon the topmost branch of one of the forest trees?"

"Yes, my master," said the dwarf.

"Then the matter is simple," answered Matteo. "You have your knives and axes. All you have to do is to cut down one of the tallest trees upon the river bank in such a way that it falls across the stream. Then you will have a bridge by means of which, under cover of darkness, you will be able to cross to the other side."

The pygmy grinned from ear to ear. A few

yards from the bank he selected a monster tree, the foot of which was well screened by undergrowth and thickets. All day they worked—for their axes were blunt and the circumference of the trunk of the tree was great—while the fight was maintained by means of desultory shots from one bank to the other.

When the trunk of the tree was severed half-way through, Matteo himself came to inspect it.

"Is it well?" asked Kamap, who was ever at his master's side.

"It is well," said the half-caste. "Cut no more until darkness comes. The tree shall fall before the rising of the moon. And have a number of your chosen men ready to rush across the moment the way is clear."

The pygmies, who stood round in a circle, grinned and nudged one another in the ribs. Of a certainty the white man was a wizard.

"We fall upon them when they are asleep!" said Kamap. "My master, the plan is good."

In the meantime, George East had not been idle. He had found near the place where they had landed a narrow creek; and into this, at some risk to themselves, he and Bryan had

paddled their canoe. There they had off-loaded all their supplies and ammunition, work to which Lubanshi energetically applied himself, as he looked forward to gaining possession of a large portion of the barter goods, provided he ever reached his own tribe in safety.

East was by no means greatly alarmed at what had happened. He had never hoped to accomplish so long and perilous a journey without falling foul of some savage tribe. He knew that he had entered the land of the Obongo pygmies; and he had thought it more than probable that these treacherous little people would attack his party without warning. He realized also that the worst part of his journey was yet to come. The overland route was particularly arduous and dangerous, by reason of the fact that they would be greatly encumbered by the quantity of baggage they desired to convey to the chief of Lubanshi's tribe.

That evening, at sunset, East called his river-boys together and addressed them.

"I desire porters," said he, "to accompany me upon my journey through the forest. I know that you are canoe-men and cannot walk great distances on land, but I promise you we

will travel by easy stages. And I will give every man who volunteers to accompany me, carrying a load upon his head, two thousand brass rods when we return in safety to Balonga."

When the natives heard this they opened their eyes exceedingly wide; for two thousand brass rods per man was a generous reward, and they were poor. Some of them were slaves who for years had dreamed of one day being able to purchase their freedom. As usual they were unable to decide without discussing the matter between themselves.

After about half an hour the head canoe-man came to East.

"Master," said he, "we will do what you ask of us if you pay each man four thousand brass rods."

"I will give you three thousand," said the Englishman.

"Very well," answered the negro at once, without troubling to consult his comrades, "we agree to that, provided that on top of each heap of three thousand brass rods you place one tin plate, fifty looking-glasses, and fourteen empty pickle-bottles."

"It is agreed," said East.

"It is agreed," said the native.

And that is the way business is done on the Congo.

The natives laid them down to sleep with the best intentions in the world. They had made their bargain, and undoubtedly they meant at the time to hold to it. But unfortunately the heart of the black man is fickle, his resolution weak. He is without discipline and wisdom. He believes in ghosts and witchcraft.

In the earlier part of the night, before the rising of the moon, when Bryan East was on watch and the canoe-men were asleep, there came upon a sudden a great crashing sound like a peal of thunder. Bryan had no time to give the alarm. Indeed, he only just succeeded in saving his own life by the skin of his teeth.

He heard a loud report like that of a cannon. A moment after he saw a huge, dense form, darker than the sky, bearing down upon him like a monstrous thunderbolt. He got to his feet and sprang hastily aside; and as he did so the very trees about his ears were, as it seemed, riven into splinters. Branches broke like match-wood. The noise was deafening. On every side of him was chaos. Monkeys that had been

sleeping in the tree-tops screeched like lost evil spirits, while flocks of blind, startled birds shot upward into the air.

And before the noise had died down the wild war-cry of the Obongo pygmies had burst upon the night, and scores of agile little forms were to be seen leaping rapidly across the great bridge that now spanned the river.

This was more than the faint hearts of the river-men could stand. Panic-stricken, terrified, their minds filled with thoughts of the wicked and active spirits of the bush, they sprang up from their sleep. Two of them rushed wildly into the forest, but the other four showed more presence of mind, if they proved equally unfaithful to their masters. One after the other in quick succession they tumbled into the canoe—which, fortunately for them, was on the down-stream side of the fallen tree—and in this they paddled furiously away, leaving East and Bryan to their fate.

CHAPTER V

THE OBONGO ATTACK

THE great tree that had been felled on the other side of the river now lay athwart the stream, its heavy, higher branches having smashed through the tree-tops and undergrowth on the opposite bank. In the jungle itself it was impenetrably dark, but the surface of the river was illumined by the light of the stars; and this was sufficient to enable Bryan to distingush the small, agile forms of the Obongo pygmies advancing rapidly in single file across the bridge that now spanned the river.

The calamity had been so rapid that Bryan could not at once grasp the situation. Not until he beheld the panic-stricken river-men tumbling helter-skelter into their one and only canoe, and paddling down-stream for their lives, did the boy realize the desperate situation in which he and his father found themselves.

Two natives, it will be remembered, had fled ndly into the forest. Terrified by the thunderous

crash of the falling tree and the savage war-cries of the Obongo, they had forgotten for the moment their inborn fear of the evil spirits of the bush.

Hence it was there were only three of them left to defend the bridgehead against the attack of their active little foes, armed with their poisoned darts and arrows. East himself at once dashed to the side of his son, whilst Lubanshi, the Red Tribesman, followed close upon his heels.

With his teeth set in a grin, his painted face resembling in the dim light a grotesque and hideous mask, with his long fighting spear in one hand and his shield of elephant-hide in the other, Lubanshi, shouting the battle-cry of his own warlike people, prepared to receive the van of the assault.

And even as he shouted the first and boldest pygmy gained the end of the fallen tree, to spring to the river bank. Neither East nor Bryan had time to fire before the Red Tribesman had plunged his spear into the heart of his opponent, wrenched the blade free and flourished it on high above his head, while again his war-cry rent the air. A warrior had drawn blood ; the fighting instincts of a savage were roused. Henceforward, Lubanshi had no fear of death or wounds.

"Your revolver, Bryan!" cried East. "And keep under cover. The little fiends are dead shots with their bows and arrows, and if you're struck, it's poison."

Placing himself in one of the topmost forks of the felled tree, in such a position that nothing was exposed to view but his head and shoulders, George East fired repeatedly and with precision. And in between the shots he gave his directions, first to his son and then to Lubanshi, who was now frenzied with battle.

"They must advance in single file," said he. "There lies our only hope. Bryan, go back to the place where the stores were off-loaded, find a box of revolver cartridges and bring them back here. I can hold them at bay till you return; and if by chance I miss my man, Lubanshi is here to support me."

Bryan was not slow to obey his father's orders. He experienced no difficulty in finding the cartridges, and in a few minutes had returned to his father, who was already out of ammunition and fighting with one of the hunting spears of Lubanshi.

And then, for a few seconds only, they were in jeopardy. For a moment it looked as if the

fight would turn against them. The Obongo were crowded together upon the end of the tree, discharging their poisoned arrows in quick succession over the shoulders of one another. By sheer weight of numbers they threatened to gain the river bank. Indeed, they must have done so, had it not been for the heroism of Lubanshi, the wild man of the woods, in whom the lust of killing now raged like a burning fire.

With another yell, louder and more fierce than any he had yet given, the native sprang from behind the branch where he had been crouching. For a moment he stood quivering in every limb like a huge black cat about to spring upon its prey. Then, suddenly, he hurled himself into the very midst of his enemies.

He was like a leopard among jackals. One after the other he seized them in his arms, lifted them off their feet, and flung them right and left into the river, shouting like a madman. And a minute later he had returned to his place by the side of the Englishman, with never so much as a scratch.

"My master," he cried, his white teeth showing, "behold, the Obongo drown like mice!"

The situation was saved. Both revolvers

were now loaded ; and they had enough ammunition to last them throughout the night.

Though the pygmies were both brave and cunning, they had no chance against modern Colt revolvers, weapons that dealt certain death in the darkness at almost point-blank range. And presently the full moon arose above the forest trees, enabling the two Europeans to fire at a longer range.

" We've got them, Bryan ! " cried East. " They're beaten men, and they know it."

Upon the opposite side of the river, Matteo Valletta, the so-called Wizard of Talai, raved like a madman in the shadow of the trees. He rounded upon Kamap, and cursed him for not leading his men in person into that narrow death-trap.

" It is no use, my master," the dwarf protested. " Why should I send the Obongo warriors to join the spirits of their fathers ? "

" Ye are three score," cried Matteo, in derision ; " and three only hold your fighting men at bay ! "

" That may be so," answered the little chieftain ; " but two are armed with weapons of fire ; and the Obongo must advance in single

file, as the elephant herd passes through the forest. We must retreat, my master, and bide our time. We can lie in hiding in the bush and fall upon them unawares."

Valletta, observing that the moonlight now fell upon the river bank but a few yards in front of him, drew back stealthily into the shadows of the undergrowth, fearing that his white clothes might be seen from the opposite bank.

He realized there was wisdom in the words of Kamap. It was useless to continue the combat, a losing fight.

"Order the retreat," he growled.

Without waiting to see these instructions obeyed, he turned sharply upon his heel and vanished amid the darkness of the woods.

Though the Obongo drew off immediately, East and his two companions were unable to obtain any sleep that night; for they had no means of knowing whether or not the pygmies intended to renew the battle.

By daylight, however, they were well assured that the enemy had retired from the opposite bank of the river. And by that time the two negroes who had deserted at the crucial moment had returned to the bivouac, looking scared and

crestfallen, and not a little ashamed of themselves.

They had succeeded in losing their way, and had passed a night such as neither was ever likely to forget. So frightened were they, or else so great was their capacity for falsehood, that they were prepared to swear that during the night they had undergone the most terrible experiences. They had heard the voices of ghosts and evil spirits all round them; and they had been bewitched. But when they discovered that their brethren had fled downstream in the canoe, and that they were left alone with the Englishmen and the Red Tribesman in the very heart of the wilderness, they realized all at once that however great the terrors of the night had been they were now in even greater danger.

The whole party, in very truth, was in a sorry plight. Cut off from their only possible line of retreat by way of the river, with the Obongo pygmies encamped somewhere in the neighbourhood, the odds were that they would never come out of the adventure with their lives.

The party remained camped at that place for three days, during which time they were by

no means idle. East and Bryan were resolved to continue their journey towards the unknown town of Lulawanga, where they would find the chief of the Red Tribe. This was undoubtedly the safest course to pursue, as they were now hundreds of miles from the factory on the lower river.

It was quite clear, however, that they could never hope to carry their barter goods through the forest. For the time being, at any rate, these would have to be sacrificed. East therefore decided to make a cache, to dig a great hole in the ground in which he could hide these valuable possessions.

In this task he found the services of the two river-men most useful. One of these was Motu, the young man whose life East had saved from the crocodile, and who was not without some sense of gratitude. The other, whose name was Bodia, was no mean specimen of what the Congo Valley can produce in the way of ugliness—a nose as flat as a pancake, and a protruding underlip that shook when he walked, to say nothing of hair so stiffly plaited on the top of his head that he looked like some kind of human rhinoceros or unicorn.

However, both were good workers. A great

hole was made in the ground about eight feet deep, and this was filled with the boxes and bales of barter goods, which were covered with stout branches upon which earth was thrown to the depth of about two feet.

This task occupied two days, and during the afternoon of the second day they worked under considerable disadvantages. At about three o'clock it became comparatively dark ; and soon afterwards rain descended in a veritable torrent, beating upon the leaves of the trees with a noise like a sound of many drums. The water poured down in a cascade, with such force that not even the parched and thirsty earth could swallow it.

" This is the best thing that could have happened," East observed. " I see a way of covering our retreat. I'm going to cut the tree half-way through as near the middle as I can get. Very soon the river will begin to swell ; and the whole weight of the current will be brought to bear upon the trunk, which sooner or later will break in half, to be washed down-stream in sections."

East was not the man to waste time. It was then growing dark, and the rain continued to descend in a deluge. He walked along

the trunk of the fallen tree until he found himself half-way across the river, when he seated himself straddle-legged and began to hack into the wood with the sharp blade of an axe.

For a whole hour he worked, until after nightfall; then he returned hastily to Bryan, who was anxiously awaiting him.

"I've run it as fine as I can," said he. "The river has begun to swell. I give that tree till midnight."

"I shall be glad to see it go," said Bryan, little dreaming then of what was about to happen.

"So shall I," said his father. "The pygmies have no canoes; and if they want to cross the river they will have to journey many miles upstream."

Having buried such of their supplies as they were unable to carry, they decided to set forward upon their march as soon as possible after daybreak the following morning. With this in view, though it was then eight o'clock in the evening and quite dark, George East went into the bush with a lantern, in order to search for an elephant-track or the course of some woodland stream.

Bryan received orders to share the watches

of the night with Lubanshi. Neither Bodia nor Motu could be trusted as sentries, especially during the hours of darkness, when they were scared out of their lives of evil spirits. It was agreed between them that Lubanshi should take the first watch, waking the young Englishman at midnight.

Bryan almost immediately fell asleep, knowing that he had but four hours in which to rest, and it was this knowledge, in all probability, that caused him to wake quite suddenly. Glancing at the luminous face of his wrist-watch, he saw that it was ten minutes to twelve.

He sat up and rubbed his eyes. It would be foolish to go to sleep again. He saw that his father had not returned to the bivouac. Bodia and Motu were sleeping by the camp-fire. On every side there was a noise that reminded the boy of the workings of some vast piece of machinery, such as a great roller printing machine.

It took him some time to realize what this was. It was the roar of the angry river, rushing headlong upon its way towards the waterfall several miles lower down. The great tree that lay athwart the river creaked and groaned like a thing in pain. The flood fretted and mur-

mured along the river bank, while waves lashed the branches of the fallen tree.

Bryan got to his feet and stretched himself. He was wide awake now. He might as well take Lubanshi's place, and let the tribesman enjoy a few hours' well-earned rest. He looked about him. He looked on every side of him. *Lubanshi was gone!*

Bryan stepped from the shadow of the trees and looked out upon the river; and immediately it was as if his heart leapt into his mouth.

The full moon shed its light upon the troubled, roaring surface of the river. The great tree that lay from bank to bank rocked and swayed like a branch in a gale. It seemed to the boy that it was bending like a bow in the hands of a man. And as it bent, from time to time it gave forth a growling sound as if it were a wild hungry beast. Of a certainty it could stand the strain but little longer. In a few minutes it would snap in half like matchwood. And yet there was the tall figure of Lubanshi advancing step by step across the bridge towards the other side of the river!

It was as if Bryan was petrified by amazement. It was sheer madness for anyone to attempt to cross that floating, swinging death-trap.

Still the man advanced, step by step, in the full light of the moon. Bare of foot, he walked upon the trunk of that swaying tree with all the confidence in the world. More to be wondered at than anything, he had thrown away his arms; he was without his spears and his long shield of elephant-hide. He was moving swiftly with long, easy strides, with both arms extended on either side of him, to balance himself, so that his figure resembled the sign of a cross.

Bryan called to him by name, shouted at him with the full power of his lungs. It may have been that the boy's voice was drowned by the roar of the flood; but in any case the negro took no notice, never once turned his head, but continued deliberately to cross. And it was then for the first time that Bryan perceived something in the movements of the man that reminded him of those of a sleep-walker.

Without a second's hesitation the boy gripped his rifle in both hands; and, holding it as a tight-rope acrobat carries his balancing-pole, he set foot upon the trunk of the tree and began to cross in pursuit of Lubanshi.

The tree moved beneath his feet like a ship upon a deep sea swell.

CHAPTER VI

LOST!

AS Bryan advanced he shouted frantically, endeavouring to attract Lubanshi's attention, and as he drew closer to the man, he felt convinced that his voice must have been audible, for in mid-stream the roar of the waters was not so loud as nearer the banks.

Presently the boy came to the place where the trunk of the tree had been half severed by his father. Here he was obliged to exercise the greatest caution; and the very fact that the narrow neck which divided the two notches was already bent at a most alarming angle filled him with apprehension. He was already wetted to the waist by the flying spray. It seemed impossible to believe that the trunk could stand the strain for another second; and if it broke in half no power on earth could save him. No human being could live in the midst of that seething, raging flood.

"Lubanshi!" he shouted. "Come back, Lubanshi!"

The tribesman took not the least notice, though he was scarcely twenty paces in front of Bryan, and had indeed already set foot upon the river bank. He never turned his head so much as an inch, though he must have heard. Silently and swiftly, moving like a wraith, he disappeared into the darkness of the bush.

Bryan, reaching the end of the tree, hastily sprang ashore. When his feet touched terra firma he gave a sigh of relief. Throughout every foot of that perilous passage he had realized that his life was in jeopardy, yet he had no thought for the future. Whatever happened, he must overtake Lubanshi; the tribesman must be saved at any cost. If the trunk broke suddenly in half and the bridge was swept down-stream, George East would be left alone with the two canoe-men on one bank of the river, while his son and Lubanshi would find themselves cut off upon the other, in imminent danger of falling into the hands of the Obongo pygmies.

The boy, however, had no time just then to consider risks. The tribesman must be saved from himself. Bryan dashed into the jungle.

Beneath the undergrowth it was as dark as pitch. For a moment the boy lost all trace of Lubanshi; and then, to his amazement, he suddenly beheld a bright light burning immediately before him.

Instantly he slackened his pace, though he continued to advance slowly until he came to an abrupt standstill, rooted in astonishment at what he saw.

He had approached an open place where the forest brushwood had been cleared away, and in the very centre of which a fire was burning brightly, the flames leaping high into the air. And by the side of the fire, standing motionless with folded arms, dressed in his white duck suit, was Matteo Valletta.

In that place, encompassed by the darkness of the woods, the features of his face illumined by the flickering light of the fire, the man looked more sinister, more to be feared than ever. Here, indeed, was a great force of evil—one who was strong, conscious of his strength, and pitiless.

The truth burst upon the boy as in a flash. The Red Tribesman, there could be no doubt, was again hypnotized. And even then Lubanshi

himself came forth from the black shadows of the undergrowth. He walked straight towards Matteo, looking neither to the right nor to the left, never hesitating for an instant.

By the side of the fire he halted, bringing his heels together as a soldier does ; and there he stood motionless, upright, as if expectant, before the relentless man who held him in his power.

Silently Bryan East glided behind the trunk of an adjacent tree, where he was screened from view of Matteo. He could see without being seen. And since he never moved an inch and scarcely dared to breathe, he could also hear what was said.

Matteo laughed softly, as if to himself.

" And so, friend Lubanshi, you have returned ! " said he.

" I have returned, my master," said the native.

There was no sign of emotion about the tribesman, nothing to suggest that he was afraid. He had answered immediately, in a clear voice, speaking louder than Valletta.

" It was unkind of you to leave me," Matteo continued, " and it was also foolish, for by now

you should know my power. Promise me you will never desert me again."

"I promise," said the other in the same dull, almost expressionless voice.

For a moment Valletta was silent. Then he spoke again.

"And now," said he, "you will guide me and those who follow me to the town of Lulawanga, beyond the Region of Fire."

"I will, my master," answered the native.

"What is the name of your chief?"

"Nsongo."

"Do you know what I want?" asked Matteo.

"The red stones of Lulawanga," answered Lubanshi.

"Tell me, Lubanshi, how many of these red stones has Nsongo, your chief?"

"I cannot say," said the other. "Nsongo has a great box, cut out of a solid piece of wood, which is filled with thousands of these stones."

"Where does he keep this box?"

"In his own house, my master. In the royal kraal which lies in the centre of Lulawanga."

"Will he give me these of his own free will?" asked Matteo.

Lubanshi shook his head.

"Why not?" asked the other.

"He will give you nothing, my master, if you journey to Lulawanga at the head of a band of Obongo pygmies; for the Red Tribesmen and the Obongo are enemies, even as the centipede and the scorpion."

Throughout all this conversation Bryan East had remained horrified at the power that Matteo was able to exercise. There was something so uncanny about the whole affair that at that moment it seemed to the boy it was hopeless to oppose this man. Matteo was all powerful. He was the master of resources that could be used, either in defence or for aggression, beyond those of ordinary men. He was in very truth the Wizard of Talai.

Then quite suddenly Bryan bethought him of his rifle which all this time he had held in his hands. The magazine was loaded, though the safety catch was closed. Matteo was not fifteen yards away from him. He had but to open the safety catch and the breech, bring the weapon to his shoulder, and press the trigger. A bullet would save the situation.

To the boy it smacked of cold-blooded murder, but he had little or no compunction in

regard to that. In such circumstances he would think no more of killing the agent of Talai than he would of crushing the head of a poisonous snake. Stealthily and slowly he brought the butt into the hollow of his shoulder and placed the forefinger of his right hand around the trigger.

And even as he did so, there came a report from somewhere quite near at hand that was like the sound of the firing of a heavy gun. It was a sharp and yet thunderous report, and was followed by a dull, constant roar that continued without ceasing.

The great tree that spanned the river had at last given way, and the tempestuous flood was carrying all before it down the stream. Neither was the boy slow to realize what this meant to him and to Lubanshi. They were now cut off from their friends. His father and the two river-men, Bodia and Motu, were on the other side of the river, and he and Lubanshi had now no means of joining them.

If the sudden and inevitable breaking of the bridge had this effect upon Bryan East, in a very different manner it also affected both Matteo and Lubanshi. The former straightened like a man

struck, glanced about him on every side as if scared; and then, at last realizing what had happened, he dashed into the darkness of the woods, making straight towards the river bank. Knowing nothing of the fact that the tree had been severed by East, he was intent upon finding out what had happened. Possibly, he feared some novel method of attack by those upon the other side of the river. As he hastened away, he passed within a few feet of the tree behind which Bryan was hiding.

The sudden report of the breaking of the great forest tree-trunk must have carried for miles. It had a surprising effect upon Lubanshi: it startled him out of his trance. He turned and gazed about him in amazement.

Bryan rushed towards him, and grasped him by an arm.

"Come!" he cried. "There's not a moment to lose!"

The boy had every reason to suppose that Kamap and his pygmies were not far away. It that were so, the report of the breaking tree would bring them in haste to the spot, and he and Lubanshi must escape whilst there was a chance.

It would be sheer waste of time to return to the river bank ; there was certainly no means of crossing the rushing stream. Holding Lubanshi by the wrist, he dragged him forcibly into the density of the undergrowth. Almost at once, he was fortunate enough to strike the course of a shallow forest stream, and this he decided to follow for two reasons : firstly, the stream served as a kind of path ; and secondly, if they walked ankle-deep in the water, their pursuers would be unable to follow their trail.

Bryan, hastening forward through the darkness of the night, with Lubanshi following close upon his heels, had ample time in which to consider every aspect of the situation in which he found himself.

He was now separated from his father. He tried to imagine what his father's thoughts would be when he returned to the bivouac to find that both his son and the Red Tribesman had disappeared. They had left behind them no clue, nothing to suggest that they had crossed the river before the breaking of the bridge.

Bryan remembered the two river-men, Bodia and Motu. Assuredly George East himself would never be able to convince them that their friends

had not been bewitched by the evil spirits of the bush, spirited away by some magical process incomprehensible to civilized man.

Bryan was filled with apprehension as to the fate of his father. Should disaster overtake him in any shape or form, the two canoe-men could never be relied upon. As for himself, the boy realized that his own danger was even greater. He certainly had his rifle, but no more than a handful of cartridges, and Lubanshi was unarmed. They were in the very heart of the forest, cut off from their friends, and they were on the same side of the river as both Matteo Valletta and Kamap's host of pygmies.

Fortunately for them, it was comparatively easy travelling along the course of the woodland brook they followed. Bryan had a definite plan at the back of his mind. It was first necessary to get well away from Matteo. Once safe from pursuit, he intended to endeavour to find the river again with the object of working up-stream. It was more than likely that a few miles farther up there were rapids which he and Lubanshi might be able to cross, either by felling another tree or by springing from rock to rock.

All that day, resting only at long intervals,

they continued to follow the course of the brook. By evening they had every reason to think that they were safe for the time being. The most experienced tracker in the world is unable to follow a trail through running water, for the simple reason there is nothing visible to follow. By now, however, they were both thoroughly exhausted; and after eating some wild hog-plums and drinking freely of the clear water of the stream, they flung themselves down upon a mossy bank and immediately fell fast asleep.

The following morning they awoke refreshed and invigorated. Though they were still in the midst of the woods, they could not fail to be conscious of the fact that the air was now clearer and more cool. They were certainly on considerably higher ground, since the whole of the previous day they had walked against the current of the brook which was exceedingly swift. They had been gradually ascending to a higher altitude; and on continuing their march that morning, in less than two hours they came forth from the forest, to find themselves confronted by a low-lying range of hills sparsely covered with trees.

With the idea of resting throughout the heat

of the day, they made in the direction of a large wild fig-tree that afforded ample shade. Here were ripe figs to eat—a luxury they had not tasted for weeks ; and whilst they were enjoying them Bryan explained his plans to Lubanshi, in whose language he was now able to converse with comparative ease.

" The main river must be somewhere to our right," said he. " It probably rises somewhere in these hills. Once we find it, we should have no difficulty in crossing."

" And on the other side ? " Lubanshi asked.

" We must try to find my father," said the boy.

The tribesman shook his head.

" That will be impossible," he answered. " We might as well look for an ant."

Bryan sighed. He no longer feared for his own life. He knew that if the worst came to the worst the native would probably be able to guide him to the town of Lulawanga. But his father could not hope to reach the Region of Fire without a guide. Bodia and Motu would be useless to him, except in so far as they might be persuaded to carry such supplies and ammunition as he decided to take with him.

Bryan continued his journey with a heavy heart. Nor was the tribesman more optimistic. Hour after hour went by, and scarcely a word passed between them.

For five days they journeyed parallel to the crestline of the hills, subsisting upon wild fruits that grew here far more plentifully than in the darkness of the woods. On several occasions they saw herds of antelope; but although the sight of fresh meat was extraordinarily tempting, Bryan on each occasion was able to exercise sufficient strength of mind not to fire. Without doubt the report would soon bring a veritable hornet's nest of their enemies about their ears.

Early on the morning of the sixth day they came upon a stream so wide and with so swift a current that they could have no doubt that they had at last struck the river itself. One glance, however, was enough to convince them that at this place there was no means of crossing. The water flowed through a ravine, the sides of which were precipitous and in places as much as fifty feet in height. No trees grew on either bank.

"We can't cross here," said Bryan, and he turned his eyes down-stream.

In that direction the prospect was no more hopeful. The ravine ended quite suddenly about a quarter of a mile lower down, and immediately the river opened out to about three times its present width, flowing through a low-lying plain where there were few trees, though many thorn and other bushes.

Lubanshi followed the direction of the boy's gaze and at once gave an exclamation of delight.

"We can swim there!" he cried.

Bryan solemnly shook his head.

"Look again, Lubanshi," said he. "Your eyes should be better than mine. I think you will change your opinion."

The tribesman grinned, showing his white teeth.

"You are right, my master," he replied. "The river swarms with crocodiles."

This was indeed the case. The current was sluggish and the water shallow. In mid-stream there were several mud-banks upon which the great reptiles could be seen by the score, sprawling in the sunlight, resembling so many logs of wood.

"Our only hope," said Bryan, "is to work up-stream towards the summit of the hills.

The river is certain to get narrower as it nears its source."

They turned and began to climb the slope, which rapidly became steeper and steeper. All that day they journeyed along the side of the ravine. When night fell they were a short distance from the top and had not as yet found any place where they could hope to cross to the other side. The ravine had actually become deeper than ever, while the water at the bottom was nothing less than a cataract.

That night they suffered from the cold; they did not dare to make a fire, as they feared that it might be seen by the pygmies in the forest below. Fortunately they had brought with them a few figs, for they could find nothing else in the neighbourhood to eat.

By midday the following morning they had reached the crestline of the hills; and thence, looking southward, they beheld a magnificent panorama. The Great Forest lay spread beneath them like a green, luxurious carpet, extending as far as the eye could reach. Here and there between the trees they could see the river they had followed for so many miles.

They were not, however, disposed to consider the beauties of Nature at such a time. They had more practical work to accomplish. The ravine itself, though still alarmingly deep, was now not more than twenty feet across, and there were several tall saplings growing in the neighbourhood, any one of which would span the chasm.

Bryan without delay set to work with his jack-knife. Hour after hour he worked, until his fingers were numbed and the palms of his hands sore, while Lubanshi went in search of food, to return within an hour with a quantity of wild nuts.

Not until the evening had Bryan cut deep enough into the trunk of the sapling to enable them to break it down by means of their combined strength and weight. It was then necessary to cut away the upper branches ; and that done, they rolled it by degrees towards the edge of the ravine. With difficulty they raised it to a vertical position and then allowed it to drop in such a manner that it fell across the stream, extending from bank to bank.

Here, at last, was their bridge. Their efforts had been rewarded. Bryan wiped the per-

spiration from his forehead and Lubanshi grinned from ear to ear.

"Lubanshi," said the boy, "we have solved two problems out of three: we have escaped from the Obongo; we have at last succeeded in crossing the river. It only remains to find my father."

"That will be the hardest task of all," said the native.

As he spoke his eyes wandered across the forest, and immediately a look of blank amazement spread upon every feature of his face.

"See there!" he cried, pointing towards the south. "The Obongo! The Obongo themselves!"

The boy was not slow to look in the direction indicated, and at once he recognized the truth.

The river entered the forest in a long straight reach, probably two or three miles in length. The great trees were clustered on either bank like the even ranks of gigantic soldiers of hostile, opposing armies. It so happened that the atmosphere was just then wonderfully clear. They could see distinctly the series of mud-banks between which the water flowed in narrow channels. The flood that had immediately followed the

deluge had by now subsided. The Obongo had cut down several trees in the forest, and were crossing by the following method : a tree trunk had been thrown out from the river bank to the first mud-bank; a score or so of pygmies had crossed, hauled the trunk after them, and thence floated it out upon the water until it struck the second mud-bank—and so on, until they were all safely across. And among the little people they could distinguish even at that distance the white duck clothes of Matteo Valletta.

"Do you realize what this means ?" asked Bryan. "It means that my father is in the south and we are in the north, and the Obongo are between us !"

"All the same, my master," answered Lubanshi, "what we have seen is good."

"Good ?" said Bryan. "Why ?"

"The Obongo will find your father," replied the native, smiling. "And we will find him, too."

The boy looked at the tribesman with admiration in his eyes.

"You are a brave man, Lubanshi," he said.

"Come," answered the other. "We go to find my blood-brother."

Late though it was, they crossed the ravine and set forward down the hill, moving at a jog-trot. Nor did they halt until they were come to the forest itself, by which time it was midnight. They slept without troubling to post a sentry, and at daybreak were on the march again.

On the second day they had the good fortune to strike an elephant-track. They had no guide but the sun, of which now and again they caught glimpses through the tree-tops. The elephant-track, fortunately for them, led in a southerly direction.

Day after day they journeyed on, scarcely conscious of fatigue, existing upon whatever roots and berries they were lucky enough to find, Lubanshi even satisfying his hunger by eating disgusting-looking slugs.

And then the elephant-track veered away to the west, and they were obliged to plunge into the undergrowth. They grew so thin that their ribs showed like the teeth of combs, and Bryan's clothes hung upon him like washing on a rail. Gradually the truth was dawning upon them; and late one afternoon, as they flung themselves down, half-starved and utterly exhausted, Bryan

East was bold enough to look bare facts in the face.

"It's no good, Lubanshi!" said he. "You may as well confess it. *We are lost!*"

The native nodded his head. They were seated by the side of a small camp-fire. Lubanshi's face was wrinkled, as if he was an old man; and his cheeks were hollow, his eyes sunken into his head.

"I do not know where we are, my master," he confessed with a kind of groan.

For an hour they remained seated in silence by the camp-fire. They were surrounded by the blackness and silence of the illimitable woods. It was a land of desolation, where the rank, matted undergrowth and great creeping parasites, huge ferns and thorn-bushes flourished in profusion. There were cabbage-like lichens growing upon the branches of the larger trees, and here and there were orchids blooming upon the ground. But with all these there was little to eat that was not poisonous. The trunks of the trees in the gloom around them, just visible in the light of the fire, resembled the countless columns of some vast cathedral. The whole place was terrible.

It was more than the boy could bear. He was oppressed by a feeling of loneliness, of hopelessness, of unutterable despair. Moreover, he was weak from exhaustion and from want of proper food. Slowly he brought two trembling hands to his face as the tear-drops began to fall from his eyes. He was unmanned, brought at last to acknowledge irrevocable defeat.

Lubanshi never saw those tears; the tribesman sat cross-legged, gazing into the fire with eyes that saw nothing—the staring eyes of one who is as good as dead.

Suddenly, they both straightened, sitting bolt upright, alert, alive, awake. A shot had been fired in the forest. A rifle shot—and by the sound of it, not a mile away!

CHAPTER VII

THE QUEST

TO return to George East and that fateful night when he returned to his bivouac to find that both Bryan and Lubanshi had mysteriously disappeared.

He was at first unable to believe the evidence of his eyes. Both Motu and Bodia were sound asleep, but nowhere could he find a sign of the other two, though he searched everywhere, both in the neighbourhood of the cache where he had hidden his barter goods and along the river bank.

Both the canoe-men were terrified when they heard that the young Englishman and the tribesman had vanished. They were convinced that the evil bush-spirits had been at work during the night. After some difficulty East persuaded them to search the forest in the vicinity. Soon after they had gone he himself found Lubanshi's spear and shield of elephant hide lying at the water's edge; and this dis-

covery he regarded as more mystifying than ever.

He looked at his watch. It was a few minutes past twelve; and it was at that very moment that the great trunk snapped in half under the pressure of the current. East, standing upon the river bank, witnessed with his own eyes Nature's completion of the task which he himself had begun.

In spite of the great anxiety he felt in regard to the safety of his son, he could not move his eyes from the spectacle that followed. In two pieces the great tree was swept down-stream, dipping and plunging like some furious deep-sea monster, the spray flying high above the tangled branches.

And then it was that, on a sudden, a white figure appeared upon the opposite bank of the river. One glance was enough to assure the Englishman that he had looked upon the figure of Matteo Valletta.

George East drew back beneath the shadows of the trees. Thence he could watch Matteo without himself being seen. The half-breed stood quite motionless for fully a minute, and then disappeared into the forest.

We know nothing of Valletta's feelings when he returned to his camp-fire, to find that the tribesman had vanished, nor the disappointment he must have experienced when he found that he could not track down the fugitives who had followed the course of a stream.

East himself returned to the ashes of his camp-fire, and there sat down upon the fallen trunk of a tree. He found himself confronted by a puzzle not easy to solve. After a time Bodia and Motu returned with the news that they had searched the forest in all directions, and had been able to find no trace of either Bryan or Lubanshi. But by then East had solved the mystery. He had found at any rate what he regarded as the only practical and feasible explanation.

"You need search no more," said he, in the voice of one who resigns himself to Fate. "I do not think you will find them on this side of the river."

"They are no longer on the earth," said Bodia. "The bush-spirits have taken them away to Spirit-land, which is many spears' lengths under the ground."

"Rubbish!" East snapped him up. "Let

me hear no more of such nonsense ! I have every reason to believe that both my son and Lubanshi are still alive. Lubanshi knows the forest, and my son can shoot straight and will face whatsoever dangers come his way."

Heavy at heart he turned away from the native, realizing that it now remained for him to make his own plans. He could render no assistance to his son, though Bryan and his companion were likely to be in the greatest danger. East looked ruefully at the raging waters of the flood, cursing the moment when he had prepared the destruction of the bridge. Little had he dreamed when engaged upon the work that every blow of the axe was helping to place an unsurmountable barrier between himself and the boy he loved.

As the sun rose above the tree-tops of the forest, and the valley became charged with a moist, steam-like vapour, the Englishman was pacing to and fro like a tiger in a cage. Now and again he tugged at his black beard, shooting a glance in which there was more of scorn than apprehension at the two terrified, crouching natives who were now the only followers he had. And as he walked he talked to himself, half-

aloud, like one who is straining his will-power to keep calm and self-possessed.

"I must hope for the best," he muttered. "It's possible Bryan may escape. The boy has got his wits about him, and Lubanshi is not only a brave fellow but a master of woodcraft and strong as a horse."

He was silent a moment, though he never paused in his walking.

"It's certain," he went on, "that they have not yet been discovered, since no shot has been fired. There's every reason to hope. They will do their best to get back to me. Hence, they are sure to move up-stream, searching for a place where they can cross to this side. It is therefore obvious that I, too, must move up-stream; since, if we become widely separated, we will never find one another in this almighty wilderness."

And that afternoon he set forward upon his journey, accompanied by Bodia and Motu. He was obliged to throw into the river the loads that would have been carried by Bryan and Lubanshi. He regarded ammunition as more valuable than food. He and his two companions must subsist as well as they could upon what-

ever they could find in the forest that was fit to eat.

It would require many pages to describe his journey. It was the same pitiless, never-ending forest, the same dense undergrowth and everlasting twilight. It was during those days of hardship that Bodia and Motu displayed qualities such as their employer had never expected them to possess. As they became accustomed to life in the woods, their fears of the bush-spirits gradually diminished. Since they saw that no harm befell either their master or themselves, they gained greater courage ; and in a very short time they became as proficient as East himself in searching for wild plums, nuts and figs.

East followed a course parallel to the river. His compass informed him that he was journeying in a north-easterly direction. By reason of the thickets they were able to make but slow progress ; and besides, every day it was necessary to make at least two or three journeys to the river itself to see if there was any possible chance of crossing to the other side.

This was very far from the case, for the river was now even wider than it had been lower down, and literally teemed with crocodiles. For several

miles it flowed upon a perfectly straight course; and whenever the atmosphere cleared, it was possible to see a range of rugged-looking hills towards the north—the hills which by then had been gained by Bryan and Lubanshi.

Eight days passed, and George East was beginning to lose heart, to realize the possibility that he might never set eyes upon his son again. Sorrow and remorse were driving him rapidly to despair.

It was then that he sighted, a little way upstream, a series of mud-banks, extended across the river after the manner of a line of pontoons. It was apparent that the water in this place was exceedingly shallow. If he had to tackle a crocodile, he would not have to do so out of his depth. In deep water it would have been sheer folly to attempt to paddle across seated straddle-legged upon a small log. He could never have reached mid-stream without being dragged beneath the surface by one of the great, lurking, greedy reptiles.

In shallow water, however, he knew that he would have a fair chance of success. Provided that the water did not reach above his waist, he was confident that he could keep even

the largest crocodile at bay with one of the native spears.

He explained his intention to Bodia, who grinned and tugged at his extraordinary spike of hair. This was always a sign that he was pleased.

"Hold your spear low, my master," said he. "Shorten it as the crocodile approaches. When he is quite near you, he will open his mouth—they always do. Then, let him have the whole spear, right down his gullet, and draw it out quickly or else his teeth will snap it in half."

"I understand," said East. "We will teach him to hunt for mud-fish and not to meddle with human beings."

Bodia threw back his head and laughed—laughed as only a negro can. And then his laughter stopped abruptly, like the shutting off of steam. For there, upon a sandy beach at the other side of the river, stood a pygmy looking in their direction, his bow in one hand and a quiver full of arrows at his girdle.

Moreover, the little fellow had evidently seen them, for he disappeared at once, to return a few minutes later accompanied by scores of his brethren.

Seeking cover amid the thickets of the bush, East and the two canoe-men for the next hour or so watched the pygmies' movements. It was evident that the Obongo intended to cross the river with as little delay as possible.

However, they had no liking for the crocodiles. Instead of wading boldly into the water —as East had intended to do—they set about the business of crossing by means of a method of their own. First of all they beat the surface of the water with branches, which soon had the desired effect of frightening the animals away. They then brought forward several short logs which they floated from mud-bank to mud-bank, crossing the river by the slow but sure method that has already been described.

No sooner had the Obongo begun these operations than East realized it was time that he and his companions took to their heels. To remain upon the river bank would be to court certain death. A good half-hour remained before sunset, and the Englishman was determined to make the most of his opportunity. He thought it very unlikely that the pygmies would continue the pursuit after nightfall. He therefore intended to march until daybreak, in order to put

as many miles as possible between the enemy and himself.

In one sense he was unfortunate from the very first; he could find neither an elephant-track nor a brook. Not only therefore could they make but slow progress, but they were aware that they left a trail behind them that such experienced woodsmen as the pygmies could scarcely fail to follow.

There ensued a desperate, headlong race for life. It was a conflict between a civilized man and his two faithful companions and a horde of cunning savages. It was even more than that; for hour by hour George East fought against the pitiless forces of Nature.

They dared not halt to rest—the trail was wide behind them; they dared not halt even while they ate the wild fruit they gathered in the woods.

The two natives showed signs of fatigue long before the Englishman. So far as his personal appearance was concerned, East himself was by then a wild man of the woods—a ragged, tattered giant. His clothes had been torn to shreds upon the thorn-trees; he was so thin that his cheeks were hollow, his eyes wide and staring.

He grasped his rifle in his two hands so tightly that the skin showed white upon his knuckles. In the set expression of his face, in the very way he walked and the tones of his voice when he spoke, there was something that suggested that he was desperate. Anguish, too, had scored its traces upon his features. He believed in his heart that he had looked his last upon his only son; he believed, too, that nothing short of a miracle could now save his own life and the lives of the two negroes who had followed him from Balonga.

Still he struggled on. And when hope had all but died in his heart, his luck changed: they struck an elephant-track soon after daybreak; and before sunset that day had covered many miles. East, who was an experienced hunter, knew that he was following a single bull, a rogue elephant ousted from the herd by rivals stronger than himself. This was evident from the great footmarks; and besides, the track of an elephant is always unmistakable: the full-grown elephants follow one another in single file, but there is always a smaller trail on one side or the other where the baby elephants have trotted by the side of their mothers.

In all cases the wild elephant, when moving from one feeding ground to another, will wilfully destroy everything that comes within his reach. He will uproot saplings, wrench creepers from the trunks of trees and tear down branches, as if from sheer love of destruction. The elephant of the herd is always a timid beast that will fly panic-stricken at the very sight of a man. Not so a rogue, who is a nasty customer at the best of times, invariably charging on sight.

Late the following evening, East stumbled upon the bull himself. They had come upon an open glade where a number of plantains were growing; and the great, lonely monster stood stock-still, his huge head thrust through the thickets, while with his little, red, savage eyes he surveyed the first white man he had ever seen. His white tusks projected several feet in length.

East, rifle in hand, waited. He knew that the animal was about to charge; but until the elephant moved he had no chance of a shot. The Indian elephant may be killed by a bullet in the very centre of the forehead, where there is a soft patch about the size of a playing card;

but it is safest to shoot the African species behind the left shoulder, in the heart.

If East fired and only wounded the animal, his own life probably would be forfeited. And yet he could not see how he could move round to the left side of the beast, until Bodia came to his assistance—though the native had no other intention than that of saving his skin. The river-man had had little experience of wild elephants, and apparently not liking the look of the great animal, promptly took to his heels, running away from East towards the right.

Immediately the elephant charged. He cast his trunk into the air and without a sound descended upon the unhappy native like an avalanche. Lowering his head he rushed forward, his great tusks uprooting the plantains which he scattered left and right like mud that flies from beneath the wheels of a cart.

Bodia flung up his hands in terror as he fled for his life ; and then, catching a foot in the root of a tree, he tripped up and lay sprawled at his full length upon the ground. The elephant was not ten feet away from him when East got in his shot. Though the bull was moving rapidly at the time, the bullet with unerring aim pene-

trated the soft hide behind the shoulder and entered the animal's heart.

The monster went down like a ship that founders in mid-ocean. It was as if his fore knees had suddenly given way from under him. He descended upon his stomach with a thud that shook the earth, and then rolled over slowly, to lie stone dead.

And that night East and his two companions dined on fresh meat; and there are few more delectable joints than the roast foot of an elephant. For all that, though the meat supplied them with the nourishment they needed, East could not be blind to the fact that their flight before the pygmies could not be continued much longer. The two natives were at the end of their resources. Motu, the younger, was so fatigued that he could now scarcely drag one foot after the other. Bodia was not in a much better plight; and East himself had neither his former strength nor nerve.

But he was as capable, as determined as ever. Realizing that sooner or later he would have to fight, he could hope for nothing better than to sell his life as dearly as he could. And if he had to fight, what place could be more suitable than

this open glade? Here were bananas to eat, a woodland pool, and a clump of stout bamboos which might be put to a useful purpose.

He was never a man to waste words. It was an occasion when time was of the greatest value. Calling the two natives to his side, he explained what he intended to do. They must construct some kind of a palisade behind which they could seek cover from the poisoned arrows of the pygmies.

They set to work the next day, East himself cutting the bamboos, while the natives dug a circular trench, in which the bamboos were placed side by side, being bound together by thin strands of creeper which were threaded in and out after the fashion of wicker-work. They worked until long after midnight, making in the stockade a door that swung inward upon hinges of creeper, and which could be bolted by a stout branch secured in a horizontal position. Here, in truth, was a little fort in the very heart of the wilderness.

The following morning, since there were no signs of the advancing pygmies, they continued the work, making the defences more complete. They cleared the undergrowth so that they might

be afforded a better field of fire. They skinned the elephant, and of its hide, cured in the sun, they constructed a rude tent, to protect the inside of the stockade from falling arrows.

The task completed, East regarded his little citadel with a look of satisfaction.

"At least we shall give a good account of ourselves," said he. "If we must die, at any rate let us die fighting."

They had to wait but a few hours before they heard loud shouts and war-cries. Now and again they could even hear the breaking of the undergrowth and brushwood as their enemies advanced.

East waited calmly for the ordeal to come. He had stationed himself by the side of the stockade upon which the pygmies were moving. He held his rifle at the ready, the magazine charged and a reserve supply of ammunition at his feet.

Louder and louder became the shouts of their enemies. East was at a loss to understand it. He had thought that the pygmies would attack suddenly and in silence; and this was the more likely since they were undoubtedly commanded by Valletta. Instead of that they

advanced as though they were hastening to a feast.

Presently they were not more than a few yards from the clearing. Once or twice, in the sunlight East caught a glimpse of the oiled, glistening body of a dwarf; and presently one man rushed into the open, his bow bent as if about to shoot.

East raised his rifle and was on the point of pressing the trigger, when he was amazed to realize that the pygmy had not even seen the stockade. His arrow was directed into the thickets towards the right. And at that moment a rifle shot was fired--but not by George East himself. The pygmy threw up his hands with a screech, and then sank to the ground; a second later, Bryan rushed into the clearing; and close upon his heels came Lubanshi, smeared from head to foot with red camwood powder.

"Bryan!" cried East.

The boy turned and saw his father.

A moment later, amid a shower of arrows Bryan and Lubanshi rushed through the gate that was slammed behind them.

The father had time to do no more than take his son into his arms, and then wring both

"Amid a shower of arrows Bryan and Lubanshi rushed through the gate."

the boy's hands until Bryan almost winced; for the Obongo wasted little time. They surrounded the stockade, and were only driven back by rifle fire. Three times they attacked that day, and each time they were beaten back with heavy loss. It was no doubt Matteo himself who counselled more cunning tactics; for by night the pygmies drew a cordon around the little bamboo fort, evidently resolved to starve the garrison out—to wait, if needs be, for a month, convinced that the defenders must be forced to surrender in the end.

But Bryan was overjoyed to have found his father again. The rifle-shot that the boy had heard had inspired within him a renewal of hope and courage, at a moment when he was sunk into the very depths of despair. Knowing that his father was somewhere near at hand, it had yet taken him more than thirty-six hours, searching in all directions in the tangled jungle, to find the bamboo stockade; and even then, he was only guided to the place by the loud war-cries of the pygmies.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ESCAPE

FROM that hour the siege began. And surely it is difficult to imagine a situation more desperate or circumstances in one sense more romantic. They were but two Europeans —an Englishman and his son—aided by three faithful negroes, buried in the very heart of the great African wilderness, hundreds of miles from the nearest outpost of civilization, and they were surrounded by a horde of savage pygmies under the command of a half-caste.

It seemed as if they could never hope to pass unseen through the cordon of their little, watchful enemies that surrounded the bamboo fort. Fortunately for them, the elephant that East had killed provided sufficient meat for several days. However, this could not last for ever in the great heat of the sun, and their supply both of plantains and of water was limited. It was thirst, of a certainty, that

sooner or later would conquer them more surely than poisoned arrows.

Matteo was never likely to raise the siege—if such it may be called. Realizing that the position was too strong to be captured by a direct assault, he was quite content to sit down and wait for the inevitable, for the white flag of surrender to be hoisted over the stockade.

So far as capitulation was concerned, no thought was further from the mind of the Englishman. He had made known his plans to Bryan and the natives, and all were willing to make a bold bid for freedom.

He instituted a series of sorties or raids, which the enemy found particularly annoying and which resulted in several casualties among the pygmy ranks. Almost every night, before the rising of the moon, two or three of them would issue from the gate of the fort, creep stealthily across the glade, and dashing suddenly into the thickets, attack the first pygmies they happened to come across, racing back to the stockade before the others had time to fire a single arrow by way of retaliation.

On five consecutive nights these raids took place, with the result that the pygmies became

thoroughly nervous, not knowing what part of the cordon would be next attacked. And it was for this reason that the cordon was withdrawn a distance of twenty or thirty yards.

And thereby East succeeded in gaining the very object he wanted. In the small hours of the morning he called a council of war, at which he and his son and the two river-men were present, while Lubanshi patrolled the pallisade on the look-out for an attack.

"The road is now open," said he. "It may be possible for us to escape. It will be a dangerous enterprise; but we are practically at the end of our food."

"My master," said Bodia, "how can we escape? We are surrounded. The pygmies are on every side of us. We cannot pass through them, for they outnumber us by sixty to one."

"That is true," said East. "You have spoken truly, Bodia: we cannot break through them; neither can we escape under the ground —but, it is now possible that we may be able to escape *over their heads*."

Bodia let out a guttural click by way of an exclamation of surprise.

"We are not birds," he cried, "nor flying foxes!"

East smiled.

"That also is true," he answered. "We are neither birds nor flying foxes; and yet we are not so far removed from monkeys, inasmuch as we have hands and are able to climb. When I made this stockade I had an eye to the future. I took careful stock of the trees that surround the glade; and I did not fail to notice the large tree towards the west, the trunk of which is encircled by a great creeper that climbs to the upper branches, a hundred feet from the ground.

"This tree we can climb quite easily," he continued after a pause. "And once we have gained the upper branches, it should not be difficult to find our way from one tree to another, until we are able to descend. Thus we can make good our escape."

Both natives clapped their hands in delight.

"Our master is a great man," said Motu, "one of the Cloud Folk, who learned wisdom on the earth ages ago. But at the same time, it will not be possible to escape from the pygmies who can travel more rapidly through the forest

than we can, since we are more accustomed to the river."

"There again," said East, "I can set your mind at rest, my good Motu. Have you forgotten the rogue elephant that I shot more than a week ago? Surely you know that such an animal leaves a track behind him wider than a footpath through a maize field?"

The negroes smacked their lips.

"That is well said," observed Motu. "Let us escape at once, for we have neither food nor water to drink."

A few minutes later they crept as silently as snakes across the glade, until they had gained the great tree about whose trunk was a gigantic creeper that was slowly, and yet surely, strangling it to death, after the manner in which ivy will kill a sycamore or elm.

East himself was the first to ascend, with Bryan close upon his heels. Fortunately the creeper was as easy to climb as a rope ladder; for its stem, twining and twisting round the trunk, had many side-branches all of which were strong enough to take the weight of a full-grown man.

Eventually East arrived at the first great

branches, sixty or seventy feet from the ground, that bifurcated from the main trunk of the tree. Not content with that, he ascended still higher, until he deemed it safe to light a lantern. His position was now well screened from the ground by the leafy branches beneath him that were so intermingled and matted together that it was as if they formed a veritable carpet.

Lubanshi now took the lead, for the man was as active in the tree-tops as a monkey ; and it was a comparatively simple matter for the others, aided by the light of the lantern, to follow him. After an hour's slow and tedious climbing they found a tree that was encircled by a creeper similar to that by which they had ascended.

Here they decided to climb down, taking what risks there were ; and as they neared the ground it was Bryan who was the first to notice that several of the upper branches of the undergrowth and the lower, weaker branches of the great tree had been broken in half, leaving sharp, pointed ends which were exceedingly dangerous, especially to the natives, who were unprotected by clothes.

"We have struck the elephant track!"

Bryan whispered to his father, for they still deemed it unsafe to speak aloud.

"A stroke of luck," said East. "It might have taken us hours to find it."

A minute later all five stood together upon the path made by the rogue elephant; and then, in single file, they set forward at a jog trot, through the darkness of the woods.

The pygmies could not have discovered their escape until several hours after they had gone. They had thus a good start, though it took them ten days to reach the so-called Region of Fire.

They were then clear of the forest; and when they came forth into the sunlight, their eyes were almost blinded by the glare. Lubanshi at once gave vent to a loud cry of triumph.

"I know where we are!" he cried, pointing excitedly towards the north. "There is my own country, my master! Yonder is the Region of Fire!"

East and Bryan, following the direction indicated by the native, observed a range of mountains in the distance, about thirty miles away. These mountains were almost purple in colouring, as if they were of red sandstone, and were singularly devoid of trees. The whole

scene, indeed, was barren and arid, dried up by the sun. Here and there were a few stunted shrubs; but for the most part the country was devoid of vegetation. Nowhere was there any sign of life in any shape or form, save for a few vultures that circled in the sky above them.

"There is a river," said Lubanshi, "that flows from the mountains. Beyond the mountains there is a wide valley where there is a wood in which my people live. There we will find food and friends. In five days we should be there."

"Five days!" exclaimed Bryan. "Why, it is no distance at all!"

Lubanshi shook his head.

"The mountains are farther off than they look," he answered; "and besides, the way is treacherous. It is well that I am with you, and know a path; for there are places where the ground is hollow under foot, where there are many little holes from which comes smoke and hot water. One false step, and a man falls through the crust of the earth, never to appear again."

After resting, they set forward upon their march, covering several miles before nightfall,

That day they had nothing whatsoever to eat, though they found pools where they could drink water which was warm and yellow with sulphur.

Early the following morning they came upon a river where Motu and Bodia speared several fish. And two days after, they climbed the lower slopes of the mountains. Now that he was approaching his own tribe, Lubanshi was light of heart, talking incessantly and wearing a continual grin upon his features. He was a very different man from the poor, hypnotized and frightened savage who had stumbled into Matteo's room at Talai, on the night when East had rescued him from the clutches of the half-caste.

"You and I, Lubanshi," said East, "are blood-brothers; but what guarantee have I that your chief will receive me as a friend?—for I come now without barter goods, without brass rods or looking-glasses, since—as you know—we have been compelled to leave those behind us."

"All that," said Lubanshi, "I will explain to the chief. He is an old man, wise in his generation, and his heart is kind."

The following morning they were up before

daybreak, and set forward in a body towards the crestline of the hills. There they were greeted by the sunrise, and presently a magnificent panorama was unfolded before them.

The northern slopes of the hills were clothed in trees, yet not so densely packed that they could fail to see herds of antelope, moving downhill to drink. To the south was a wide, grassy plain where cattle were grazing, though farther afield there were antelope again. In mid-valley was a vast wood, several miles in area, at the northern extremity of which was a town of grass huts, surrounded by a stockade, which Lubanshi delightedly pointed out as the principal town of his tribe.

Even as they looked down upon the scene, a body of men, who were like a swarm of ants and who must have numbered at least three or four hundred, were to be seen issuing from the forest, charging like infuriated mice upon the stockaded town.

East at once raised his field-glasses to his eyes; and the sight that he beheld caused him to hold his breath. He saw that the little charging men were savages who were armed with bows and arrows; but this alone would not

have been sufficient to convey to him the truth, had he not observed in their very midst the figure of one who was dressed wholly in white.

He turned to his son with his fists tightly clenched.

"The Obongo!" he cried. "Valletta and his pygmies are there before us! And by the look of things, Lubanshi's people will be taken by surprise."

They could do nothing. They were at least five miles from the town, which was situated in mid-valley at the northern extremity of the wood; and though they could see everything that happened, they were powerless to lend a helping hand.

The tribesmen were quite unprepared for so sudden and impetuous an attack. Before their warriors had time to form themselves into a body and to man the wooden walls of their citadel, Valletta and his savage pygmies had broken through the main gate and had set the adjacent huts on fire.

CHAPTER IX

RUBIES OF LULAWANGA

THE native huts of dried leaves and grasses burned like brushwood. A great column of smoke was to be seen rising from within the walls of Lulawanga, and this in some degree served to mask what was actually taking place.

For some time they were doubtful which way the battle was going. The pygmies—so far as they could make out—had gained the eastern quarter of the town, where they were encountering stubborn resistance from the tribesmen.

Presently, however, they beheld a large body of people streaming from the western gate. These fugitives were women and children and old men ; and among them was a party of eight young women who bore between them a heavy chest that was as much as they could carry.

From this it was clear that the chief of the Red Tribesmen hoped to do no more than stave off the enemy while the weaker of his subjects made good their escape, taking with them every-

thing of value, including the great box that contained his rubies.

Slowly but surely the town of Lulawanga was captured by the pygmies. Inch by inch the little warriors fought their way to the king's kraal, which was situated in the very centre of the enclosure.

In the meantime George East and his companions were hastening down the hill, though they could never hope to reach the town in time.

However, they soon gained the cover of the woods, though by that time the Red Tribesmen had been defeated and the greater part of their town was on fire.

It was not until after midday that East and those with him came within decisive rifle range of the pygmies. By then the chief of the Red Tribesmen had ordered a retreat. Lubanshi was cut off from his friends, who were retiring in a body up the slope of the hills.

"Where are they going to?" cried East.

"To the caves," answered Lubanshi, "where the pygmies will not dare to follow them."

"What caves?" Bryan asked.

"In those hills yonder," answered Lubanshi,

" there are as many caves as there were dwellings in Lulawanga. Here the chief means to hide until the pygmies have returned to the forest."

" And why will the pygmies not follow up the retreat ? " asked the Englishman.

" Because there is but one road that leads to the caves," replied Lubanshi ; " and that is a road that follows a spur of the mountains, the top of which is so narrow that not more than ten men can walk abreast, whilst upon one side of it there is a great precipice."

" You forget," said East, " that the pygmies are commanded by the Wizard of Talai, who will not rest until he has gained possession of the box of red stones that has been carried to the caves."

Instantly Lubanshi looked alarmed.

" I had forgotten him," he whispered, too awed by the very recollection of the man to speak in a voice above a whisper.

If Lubanshi was frightened, East himself was puzzled. It was difficult to know what to do. He desired to join Lubanshi's friends ; but for the time being this was impossible, since the pygmy force lay between the tribesmen and

themselves. They could not hope to advance in broad daylight across open country without being seen by Matteo and Kamap.

"You have told me," he said, still speaking to Lubanshi, "that in this wood there are many villages of your own people?"

"Small villages," said the native, "where live those who hunt in the bush, who pay tribute to the chief of Lulawanga."

"I have a plan," said East. "Take us to the nearest village. Make me known to the head-man. Say that I come as a friend. He will know of the disaster that has taken place. He will call the head-men of other villages, and they must summon their warriors with as little delay as possible. If they are good hunters, they should be good fighting men. In a very little time we should be able to gather together a force of a hundred spears. I propose to wait until the pygmies attack the caves. Then I myself will lead these men into battle. We will attack the enemy from the rear. They will be caught between two fires, crushed as a nut can be broken between the teeth."

"It is a good plan," said Lubanshi, "though I have not told you that there are several places

where the precipice is fallen, where a man can climb down to the bottom."

He led them along a path in a northerly direction, and in a little time they came to a small village consisting of a few huts. The head-man was mightily astonished at the appearance of the Europeans—he had never seen white men before in his life.

He knew that Lulawanga had been captured and burned to the ground, and that the chief and his warriors had fled to the caves. Lubanshi explained to him what the Englishman suggested, and the native was not slow to see that such tactics would be likely to prove successful. That night, the head-man provided them with an excellent meal of antelope meat, as well as stewed manioc and sugar-cane wine.

And while East and his party rested, the head-man sent his followers into the wood, carrying the news to the head-men of other villages; so that at daybreak the following morning, there was assembled a force of warriors who were magnificent men to behold.

These people were giants in stature. They were all painted from head to foot with red camwood powder. Armed with their long ele-

phant-hide shields and fighting spears, they look formidable warriors, indeed.

While the dim morning light was spreading slowly through the woods, George East, guided by Lubanshi, led his little column towards the hills. And when they came forth into the sunlight they could see no sign of the Red Tribesmen. They were evidently hiding in the caves, the mouths of which were a little below the crestline of the hills before them. At that distance the caves resembled the small holes made by martins in a sand-pit.

But the pygmies were to be seen advancing along a steep spur that was like a buttress. Matteo himself was there, his white clothes conspicuous in the midst of the black forms of his little allies.

Lubanshi tightly gripped his spear.

"The time has come, my master?" he asked.

"Not yet," said East, quite calmly. "Let them gain the top of the slope. Let them walk into the trap. They have hunted us for weeks."

They waited anxiously for half an hour before East gave the order to advance. By then the battle had been begun on the higher slopes of

the hills. The pygmies were attacking the caves, which were being stubbornly defended by the tribesmen.

"Will they hold them until we get there?" asked Bryan of his father.

"No fear of that," said the other. "All men will fight to the death when their wives and children are behind them."

It was scarcely strange that the advance of this counter-attack from the rear was never noticed by Matteo or Kamap or any of their men, until it was too late for them either to make good their escape or to detach a party from the main attack. They had their work cut out to deal with the Red Tribesmen, who fought like lions before the mouths of the caves; and on that account they were obliged to keep their eyes in front of them. When the conflict was at its fiercest, East and his men, filling the air with cheers and war-cries, charged up the slope, to fling themselves upon the enemy.

Matteo Valletta realized too late what had happened, that he and those with him were caught like rats in a trap. He could advance no farther up the hillside by reason of the warriors who held their ground before the caves.

He could retire to neither flank because of the cliffs between which his front was narrowed. Nor could he retreat the way he had come, because the road was barred by the rifles of East and Bryan and the spears of the warriors who followed them.

Beyond doubt, at that moment, Matteo Valletta believed he was lost. Shouting an oath, he gripped his revolver in his hand and dashed down the hill, resolved to sell his life as dearly as he could.

The turmoil and confusion that followed beggars all description. The Red Tribesmen before the caves, seeing that their comrades had come to their assistance and that the enemy was caught as it were between the hammer and the anvil, charged furiously into the thick of the pygmy host. East and Bryan fought as if they, too, were savages. Emptying the magazine of his rifle, Bryan discharged the chambers of his revolver to right and left. In a brief respite in the midst of the conflict, the boy beheld the spectacle of his father, standing at his great height, wielding his rifle as a club—a Titan in the midst of dwarfs.

No savage people can stand the shock of a

surprise so sudden and complete. In less than five minutes the pygmies broke and fled. They had no way of escape, except at one place where the cliff had fallen and there was a steep slope that descended several hundred feet. Fortunately for them, they were active and agile; and hurling their arms away, they rushed for safety, springing into the air and leaping from boulder to boulder.

How Matteo made good his escape is little short of a miracle. In the first transports of his rage he struggled desperately to reach East, to wreak his vengeance upon the man he had always hated. The pygmies, however, were crowded closely together in the swaying press of the battle; and it is probable that the half-breed found himself carried off his feet by the sheer weight of those around him. He must have realized then that it were better to save his life than to die fighting like a madman. Possibly he was borne down the slope by the very pressure of those above him, panic-stricken, desirous only of gaining a position of security with as little delay as possible.

The slaughter was terrible; for the Red Tribesmen were no more disposed to give quarter

than they had been to ask for it. Their victory was complete.

A few minutes later East and Bryan found themselves standing before the grey-haired chief of Lulawanga, whose name was Nsongo.

He, too, had never before set eyes upon a white man. As he looked from Bryan to his father and back again at the boy, an expression of unutterable amazement spread over his face.

Lubanshi stood by the side of East ; a little way behind were Motu and Bodia.

Lubanshi, at that moment, was a proud and happy man, in spite of which his face was taut and his lips were tightly closed.

" These are our friends," said he to the chief, " wise in counsel, mighty in battle. Thanks be to them alone that the Obongo have been put to flight ! "

The chief thanked the white man from his heart. He realized that they had saved his tribe from probable extermination. He was anxious to make blood-brotherhood, to prove the gratitude he felt. They had only to ask for what they wanted, to receive whatsoever it was within his power to give.

East thanked Nsongo for his kindness, adding

that there was plenty of time in which to seal the terms of their friendship. Then he went on to say that there was much to be done without loss of time. Several of the Red Tribesmen had been wounded by the poisoned darts and arrows of the pygmies; and these wounds must be attended to without delay if the lives of the chief's warriors were to be saved.

"That is impossible!" cried Nsongo. "We know the Obongo of old. We have fought them, time and again. Whosoever is wounded by their poisoned darts dies within a few hours. No witch-doctor can cure him, not even the Witch-doctor of the Mat."

"There you are wrong," said East. "Among my own people there are medicine-men who are greatly skilled. I believe that I can save the lives of many."

The chief opened his eyes wider than ever. It was plain to see that he was still incredulous.

"If you do that," said he, at last, "no reward that I can give you will be enough to show my gratitude; for I love my people, over whom I have ruled for more than thirty years."

East turned to Lubanshi and told him to descend the slope of the hill to the foot of the

spur, where they had hidden their medicine chest between two boulders. And the moment he looked at the man, he saw that Lubanshi was swaying slowly from side to side as if on the point of collapsing in a faint.

"But you are wounded!" he exclaimed.

"To the death, my master," said Lubanshi, carrying a hand to his heart as if he suffered terrible pain.

The truth of this came to George East as something in the nature of a shock. During these months he had learned almost to love the great, savage warrior who had served him so faithfully. Even then he could not but admire the fortitude of the man, who had endured his pain without a murmur, who had never even mentioned the circumstance that he believed himself to be dying.

"Quick, Bryan!" he cried. "You can run faster than I. Bring the medicine chest here, as quickly as you can!"

In a few minutes Bryan returned to his father with the medicine chest. East knew that the only hope of an effective cure would be to cauterize the wound, before the poison had time to spread throughout the whole system.

He set to work with all possible speed, Lubanshi submitting stoically to the treatment of the white man in whom he had unquestionable faith.

In all probability it was his faith that saved him. Cauterization undoubtedly did a great deal of good; but the man's heart was affected, and he was attacked by a stiffening sensation in all his limbs, attended by the greatest pain.

He bore all nobly, without a word of complaint, drank what medicine was given him, and followed East's instructions. For three days and nights he fought with death, but the life within him was strong; and in the end the strength of his constitution conquered and he was able to walk, leaning upon a stick.

And Lubanshi's case was much the same as that of scores of others, though some, who were only slightly wounded, were almost perfectly well the next day, after their wounds had been cauterized and dressed. All that afternoon East and Bryan were busy in one of the caves, which was converted into a kind of clearing station to which the wounded were carried one after the other. And when these miracles were beheld by the Red Tribesmen, the word was passed from mouth to mouth that

the greatest witch-doctor in the world had come to the people of Lulawanga; and the villagers from the woods in mid-valley climbed the hill to the caves in order to gaze in wonderment upon George East and his son.

It must be understood that the fees demanded by African witch-doctors are enormous. A thousand brass rods is no small price to ask for casting out an evil spirit. For saving life itself in such a wholesale manner, to say nothing of the fact that their most deadly enemies had been scattered, the Red Tribesmen were not slow to realize that a fit reward would be equal to the sum total of all their wealth.

One morning about a fortnight after the Battle of the Caves, a great palaver was held upon the hillside at which the chief himself presided. The tribesmen crowded together, those in front squatting upon the ground and those behind standing upon tiptoe. They had formed themselves in the shape of a long rectangle. At one end of this was Nsongo, seated under a great umbrella made of palm-leaves, surrounded by his witch-doctors. At the other end were Bryan and his father, attended by Lubanshi and the two canoe-men.

The palaver opened with a long speech by the chief, who literally showered compliments upon both the Europeans. George East replied as briefly as he could, Lubanshi interpreting his words. And then there followed the ceremony of making blood-brotherhood—a custom prevalent among all the savage tribes of Africa.

Wood scrapings and salt were mixed together in an iron basin, the size of a soup tureen. The leading witch-doctor, who was called the Witch-doctor of the Mat, because he invariably performed his magic seated upon a very dirty piece of carpet, then advanced carrying a sharp knife in his right hand. With this knife he opened veins in the extended arms of both George East and the chief, so that the blood of the two contracting parties dripped into the iron bowl, where it mingled with the wood shavings and the salt. The chief then received from the hands of the witch-doctor a short stick, called the *ndeko*, when he repeated these words : " If I break this oath, may my nose fall off." East was obliged to go through the same ceremony, uttering the identical words ; and then, when these extraordinary rites were concluded, and the Englishman and Nsongo were blood-brothers, the Medi-

cine-man of the Mat took a palm frond in his hands and solemnly tore it in half. This was a fetish having power to punish anyone who broke the covenant that had been made.

When the witch-doctor declared that the palaver was at an end, it was as if all the tribesmen assembled had suddenly become raving lunatics. They danced and sang and shouted, and waved their spears in the air. A bevy of women then suddenly appeared, carrying jars filled with sugar-cane wine which had been prepared the day before. Of this every man drank as much as he could, the women being strictly forbidden to touch it; and if the truth be told, within half an hour nine-tenths of the warriors were anything but sober.

They danced a war-dance that continued by torchlight until long after dusk; they sang strange, barbarous songs to the beating of drums and cymbals.

When the feast was at an end, Nsongo turned to East.

"And now," said he, "my brother has but to ask for his reward."

East never hesitated. He had made up his mind long since. He had, indeed, ventured into

the heart of the wilderness only that he might obtain possession of the rubies of Lulawanga.

"Oh, Nsongo," said he, "I desire above all things some of the red stones that are yours."

The chief did not seem in the least dismayed, but straightway answered that he was willing to give the white man as many as he liked.

"You shall have all that I possess," he answered. "I had thought that you would demand cattle, for oxen are more valuable than these red stones."

"You, also, shall have all that I possess," said East. "When I return to my own country, if you send me a score of your warriors, I will take them to a place where I have hidden a great quantity of barter goods, such as will delight your heart and the hearts of your people. These they will bring back to you. Lubanshi will tell you that I am as good as my word. Besides, we have made blood-brotherhood together, and I will be true to my oath."

By then they had entered the cave in which the chief had taken up his abode.

Nsongo took up a torch that was burning in the cave, and with the other hand flung back the lid of a great box.

"Behold with your own eyes the red stones of Lulawanga!" he cried.

The two Englishmen looked down upon a sight that made their hearts beat violently. The box was filled to within a few inches of the top with uncut rubies, many of which were the size of hazelnuts. Here was wealth almost unbelievable. With these in his possession, George East would possess wealth beyond his wildest dreams. He thought of the years he had worked in the pestilential, steaming climate of the Congo Valley. When he remembered all the hardships he had endured, the disappointments he had suffered, he realized for the first time in his life that he had not lived in vain.

"You give me these!" he cried.

"I give you them all," the chief declared. "I give you the box itself and everything that it contains."

CHAPTER X

THE BUSH-SPIRIT

THE town of Lulawanga was rebuilt in a remarkably short time; and there George East and Bryan lived for some weeks with the Red Tribesmen, who regarded them as the greatest witch-doctors in the world. Even the Witch-doctor of the Mat himself showed no signs of jealousy. Indeed, he came one night secretly to the house in which Bryan and his father were living.

"O, white men," said he, "if you will tell me the secrets of your magic, I will show you how to cast out evil spirits."

East laughed aloud.

"That knowledge will be worth much to me," he answered, "as I fully believe that what you call possession by an evil spirit is a malady that with us goes by the name of an epileptic fit. I do not know how to cure epilepsy and would be much obliged to you if you would tell me."

"Then tell me first," said the witch-doctor,

" how you perform such miracles upon those who are suffering from fever ? "

" That will be simple enough," said the Englishman, rising to his feet and going straight to his medicine chest.

He had brought with him a liberal supply of sulphate of quinine in a powdered form. With this he filled an empty eight-ounce bottle which he presented to the witch-doctor.

" This is the secret," said he. " You have but to give the patient a quantity not larger than you can place upon your little finger-nail, cover him with blankets to keep him warm, and in two or three days he will probably be quite well. You are welcome to the bottle. And now, will you tell me how evil spirits may be cast out ? "

The witch-doctor, on tiptoe, went to the door and looked out, to satisfy himself that no one was listening. Then he returned to the centre of the room, and drew the two Europeans quite close to him, holding each by an arm and speaking in a whisper.

" It is first necessary," he began, " to procure a large lizard, though a rabbit, or even a rat, will do as well. You must cut off its head,

which you must hide in a cloth. When a man comes to you and tells you that he is possessed by an evil spirit, you must demand two thousand brass rods for casting it out. He will not give you two thousand brass rods, but you must get as much out of him as you can. If he is a rich man, he should be able to pay. If he is a poor man, you need not bother about him.

"When you have made your bargain," he continued, "you must repair to the house where the patient lives, and spread your mat upon the ground. Over the mat you must erect a tent in which you yourself can hide. This tent is very important, because no one can see what you are doing inside."

"And what *do* you do?" asked Bryan.

"You must make as much noise as you can," said the witch-doctor. "The more noise, the better for you. The people who are looking on will think that you are earning your money, and that a terrible struggle is taking place between yourself and the evil spirit. From time to time you must rush out of the tent with a knife or a spear in your hand, and pretend to chase the evil spirit in and out of the houses and among the trees. They will believe that no one

can see it but yourself, and you can do so only because you are a witch-doctor and gifted with occult powers. You need not have any occult powers, but it is necessary to be clever."

"That I can quite understand," said East.

The witch-doctor nodded in approval.

"You must keep your eyes open," he continued. "All the time you are running about, you must be looking for a suitable place in which to conclude the performance. I myself always select a house in which there is an empty room which is very dark. When you see that the people are getting tired of looking on and want to go away to their dinner, you must declare at the top of your voice that the evil spirit is in the house that you have selected. You must rush into this house, shouting as loudly as you can, without giving anybody time to get there before you. You must carry your knife in one hand, and with the other you must hold the lizard's head close to your body underneath your witch-doctor's shawl, so that no one can see it. When you are inside the house, you must be very quick about everything you do. You must shout louder than ever, to make them believe that the evil spirit is powerful and it is as much as you

can do to overcome it. When you run out of the house, you must hold the lizard's head upside-down, so that nothing is visible but the severed neck."

"And what do you do with the head?" asked Bryan, who could scarcely refrain from laughing.

The witch-doctor was silent a moment.

"You cannot perform this ceremony," he observed, "unless you are within reasonable distance of a river, into which you can throw the head before anyone has time to examine it. There is no chance of it being discovered, for within a few minutes it will certainly be eaten by fishes."

There followed a silence, during which East looked at his son, and Bryan looked at his father.

"But a lizard!" protested Bryan. "Surely, no one could mistake the head of a lizard for that of an evil spirit!"

At that his father laughed.

"The head of an evil spirit, for all I know," he answered, "may look like anything. I have always known these witch-doctors to be frauds; but this fellow is the first I have ever met who

has been frank enough to speak the truth. At any rate, I'm inclined to think he has got the best of the bargain."

The witch-doctor, to all appearances, thought so too; for he departed as pleased as Punch, tasting the quinine and loudly smacking his lips.

East had by then made all the necessary preparations for their return journey to the Warimi. He had asked Nsongo for twenty warriors to accompany them through the forest, to journey as far as the cache where they had hidden their barter goods.

To this the chief readily agreed, for he was desirous of setting eyes upon his brass rods and looking-glasses. There was not the slightest difficulty in finding twenty volunteers. Lubanshi, who had quite recovered from his wound, agreed to act as head-man and guide.

At daybreak one morning they set forward upon their long journey through the wilderness, their final destination being the trading station of Balonga. Nsongo and all his head-men, as well as the witch-doctors of the tribe, accompanied the Europeans as far as the range of hills that overlooked the Region of Fire. There the

chief bade farewell to his white blood-brother, vowing eternal friendship and repeatedly expressing his gratitude for everything the Englishman had done for him and his people.

Whatever hardships and privations he may have undergone before reaching the town of Lulawanga, George East had every reason to congratulate himself. Six stalwart natives now carried upon line-of-march the chest containing Nsongo's rubies.

The return journey through the forest was not a matter of very great difficulty; firstly, because they had as many as sixteen porters, including Motu and Bodia, to carry their ammunition and the supplies which had been given them by Nsongo; and, secondly, because they were able to follow their own track through the bush.

It took them the greater part of one day to find the elephant trail they had followed from the stockade to the Region of Fire. Once they had picked up the track, however, there was nothing to prevent them from marching many miles a day. They frequently passed their previous camping-places, where they found the ashes of their old fires. But before they gained the stockade, a certain incident occurred that led

them to believe that their adventures were by no means at an end.

It so happened that it was the time of the changing of the moon, and in consequence the nights were dark. It was their custom every night to seat themselves around a single fire, upon which they cooked whatever they had to eat. One evening, about two hours after sunset, when East and Bryan were listening to the strange folk-lore legends of the tribesmen, they were startled by a sudden cry or screech that appeared to proceed from somewhere in the forest quite near at hand.

This cry was like nothing on earth. There was something in it quite foreign to George East's experience. It could not be likened or compared with anything he had heard before ; it was unique. It resembled neither the screech of an owl nor the howl of a dog ; and yet there was something about it that was suggestive of both these cries. There was misery in it. It was weird and uncanny, and it was persistent ; for it was repeated at regular intervals of about three or four minutes for as long as half an hour. East said nothing about it, thinking it best to push on without delay.

Now, the African is invariably afraid of that which he can neither see nor understand. From the first there was not the slightest doubt in the mind of any of the natives that the vicinity of their camp was haunted by a potent bush-spirit.

That night very few of them got any sleep. East pitched camp earlier than usual the next day, desiring to give the natives a long rest; but no sooner had the sun gone down and the camp-fire been lighted than these mournful and mysterious sounds began again.

The natives huddled together like so many frightened sheep. Their eyes were wide and staring in the light of the fire. Bodia and Motu, the two river-men, were so overcome by alarm that they might have been stricken with fever and ague, for they shivered visibly and their teeth chattered like castanets.

"What do you make of it, father?" whispered Bryan.

"Nothing, my boy," East confessed. "And I may as well admit that I don't like it. Of one thing, at any rate, I'm convinced: if we don't find out what it is within the next twenty-four hours, you and I will find ourselves practically alone, for the tribesmen will take to their heels

and go back to Lulawanga quicker than they came."

Bryan regarded the matter in much the same light as his father. He was a good deal more alarmed than he had the moral courage to confess. The experience, indeed, was very unpleasant. The darkness and almost grave-like silence of the woods; the knowledge that they were surrounded by millions of gigantic trees, and undergrowth so dense and tangled that they might have been imprisoned in the confined space of a dungeon; the certainty that there was probably no European nearer to them than the Belgian agent who had relieved East at Balonga, several hundred miles away—and this mysterious, unearthly sound, issuing from out of the blackness of the woods! It was enough to strike cold fear into the heart of any man with less fortitude than East.

The natives sat in a circle as close as they could to the fire, upon which they continually heaped handfuls of dried wood. They sat rubbing their chests in the region of the heart with red camwood powder—a certain charm, in their opinion, to ward off the influence of the malignant spirits.

On the following morning, as East had predicted, the bulk of them were for returning to Lulawanga.

"We cannot stay here!" they declared. "These woods are bewitched. In a few days we will all be dead men."

The Englishman did his best to calm them. He assured them there could be nothing to fear. The noise was made by some animal with which they were unacquainted.

East knew that if they deserted him he and Bryan would have the greatest difficulty in reaching the river; they would certainly have to abandon the chest of rubies. With a grave face he turned to his son.

"This is a serious business, Bryan," he said. "And to tell you the truth, I can see no way out of it."

"May I speak to them?" asked the boy.

"By all means," said his father, "if you think you can do anything to set their fears at rest."

The natives stood together in a group, almost shoulder to shoulder. The boy placed himself immediately in front of them.

"Answer me this," said he; "has my father ever deceived you?"

"Never," they replied. "We know that the white man is as good as his word."

"You know also," said Bryan, "that the white man is wise?"

"As wise as the Cloud Folk," they replied.

"Very well, then; I'm going to ask a favour of you. Promise me that you will remain with us throughout the day. If by to-morrow morning I have not caught this evil spirit and slain him, so that he will trouble us no more, you will be free to go your own way back to Lulawanga."

"That is straight talk," they replied.

"You agree?" Bryan asked.

"We agree," said the spokesman, though it was plain to see that he was still considerably alarmed.

"Good!" said Bryan, as he turned to rejoin his father.

"Bravo, my boy!" exclaimed East, patting his son upon the back. "That's the way to tackle them."

That night they seated themselves as usual around the camp-fire. The natives, however, had no inclination either to talk or to eat. Even Lubanshi was quite unnerved. They sat staring

at one another without speaking a word. At the slightest noise in the forest each man visibly jumped. It would obviously require very little to reduce the lot of them to a condition of panic-stricken terror.

Bryan sat cross-legged by the side of his father. He had rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, and his loaded revolver lay upon the ground at his side. Outwardly, he was perfectly calm and self-possessed; inwardly, his heart was beating rapidly.

They waited, perhaps, for as long as an hour. Ordinarily, the natives would by then have laid down to sleep. But nothing was further from their minds. They were very much awake.

Quite suddenly they heard the sound again, even nearer and louder than it had been on the previous nights—a low, long-drawn moan, dismal and foreboding, the sort of sound that makes the flesh creep. Heard in that silent, lonely place it caused even George East himself to shudder. Bryan was on his feet in an instant, and glided silently into the bush.

He found himself in unutterable darkness. He could not see an inch in front of him. Very

carefully he crawled on hands and knees through the undergrowth.

He knew that everything depended upon his being absolutely silent. In all probability this was some strange wild animal that would take flight the moment it heard him. On the other hand, there was not the least need of haste.

To avoid creeping into the midst of thorn-trees or getting hopelessly entangled in the undergrowth, he used his left hand as a kind of feeler, whilst in his right he held his revolver. Whenever he was in the least doubt as to which way he ought to go, he remained absolutely silent and motionless, waiting for the noise to be repeated.

Time passed with painful slowness. It seemed to the boy that he had been crawling on the ground for hours. By now, however, he judged that he was within a few yards of the origin of the sounds. These seemed to him to proceed from a point some little way above the ground.

He was now quite sure that a strange, and possibly hitherto unknown, animal was in the neighbourhood; and he was equally certain

that this was quite small. His reasons for thinking so were logical enough. The ground beneath the trees was carpeted with dwarf bushes, the branches of which were not strong enough to support much weight.

At last, stretching forth a hand he touched, as he thought, the body of a great snake—something round, smooth and slimy.

He could not refrain from giving vent to an exclamation in which fear was mingled with disgust. And at that very moment, something dropped with a thud immediately upon the small of his back.

CHAPTER XI

VALLETTA COMES BACK

IT is obvious that a man who is pinned to the ground flat upon his face is unable to move his arms freely. Bryan's first action therefore was to roll over on to his back; and by reason of the weight of the thing that had sprung upon him, all his strength was necessary to accomplish this.

In the next few seconds he had cause to think that he had been attacked by one of the larger species of ape. Even at that moment, when he struggled desperately, it occurred to him that it would go ill with him if he had actually fallen into the hands of a gorilla. Presently, however, the fingers of his left hand grasped short, curly hair; and he knew that his adversary was a man.

Locked in each other's arms they rolled over and over on the ground, first one on top and then the other, Bryan shouting at the full power of his lungs. With the shock of the first

impact his revolver had fallen from his hand. Now, he had pinned the man's arms to his sides and held them there with all his strength, until he heard his father's voice.

"Where are you, Bryan?"

"Here," shouted the boy. "Come quickly! I've as much as I can do!"

Almost at once a light appeared; and then Bryan's responsibility was at an end. George East stood upright with the fingers of one of his great hands encircling the neck of a terrified pygmy.

With the other hand he raised the lantern, so that the light fell full upon the little fellow's face.

"Kamap!" he exclaimed. "By the size of his stomach he has gorged himself with plantains, from which I guess we are but a short distance from our old stockade. Come along, Bryan! Back to the bivouac! We must set the boys' fears at rest."

"One moment," said Bryan. "Before he sprang at me, I felt sure I touched a snake."

East whistled in surprise.

He held the lantern high above his head, without releasing his hold upon the neck of

the unfortunate Kamap, who looked as if he believed his last hour had come.

Upon the stem of a great creeper that was not ten yards away was a gigantic python, which even then glided swiftly into the darkness beyond the trunk of a tree.

"We're all right, Bryan," said East. "A chap that size is a dangerous beast when he happens to be hungry; but I expect you frightened the life out of him. Come, let's get back to the natives. They're all shivering with fright."

This was no more than the truth. The tribesmen were huddled together by the campfire. Motu and Bodia were actually sitting hand in hand like two frightened children.

When they beheld the pygmy chieftain, whom Lubanshi had seen so often at Talai, they gaped at one another and grinned, whilst Lubanshi, loudly slapping his thigh, threw back his head and laughed.

"Here's your ghost!" cried East. "Judge for yourselves; has my son satisfied you that you have no cause to be afraid?"

There was no shame about them. The Congo savage is not easily abashed. They were

delighted, and saw no reason why they should not express their delight.

The following morning they had not been an hour upon the march when they came suddenly upon their old stockade. Bryan was amazed at the very sight of it, for here was extraordinary evidence of the profuse and rapid growth of vegetation in the tropic forest. Millions of seedlings had sprung up everywhere; climbing plants had already partially covered the bamboo palisade.

Here they halted for a few hours in order to enjoy the plantains, with which the negroes stuffed themselves to a most alarming extent. They were on the march again before midday, following East's old trail towards the river, taking their captive with them—from whom, however, they could get no information. The dwarf stubbornly refused to speak.

Fearing that Matteo himself might be following their trail, they took every precaution to prevent the escape of the pygmy. Kamap's hands were tied behind his back. In addition to this, East and his son took turn and turn about as sentry during the night.

Late one evening, when Bryan was on watch

and all the others were fast asleep, the boy was suddenly startled to hear the sound of a twig breaking in the undergrowth quite near at hand.

He was seated upon the ground. Without rising to his feet or turning his head, he became instantly alert. He already held his loaded revolver in his right hand. Stealthily he slipped his first finger around the trigger, while his eyes shot right and left, endeavouring to pierce the darkness of the undergrowth. He had no desire to awaken either his father or the natives until he was quite convinced there was some actual cause for alarm.

As yet, he was sure of nothing. It might be that a leopard was prowling around the camp-fire; in which case there was nothing to fear, since these animals—unless actually starving—are habitually afraid of the light of a fire, to say nothing of their natural dread of human beings.

Bryan, for all that, was conscious of a feeling of insecurity. And then, upon a sudden, he was violently seized by the throat and hurled to his full length upon the ground.

It was natural enough that at that moment he should have pressed the trigger of his revolver. One shot was fired as the boy pitched over upon

his back, the bullet flying high among the tree-tops.

In a second every member of the party was awake, each native with his fighting spear in his hand. But in those first breathless seconds more happened than can be described in a dozen words.

In the full light of the camp-fire stood Matteo Valletta. The man was bare of foot. His white duck clothing had been torn to shreds. His hair was long and matted with dirt, and he had grown a ragged, untidy beard. If ever anyone upon this earth bore upon his person certain evidence of madness, that man was surely here.

Yet, mad or sane, he was quick and agile in his movements as a panther. In his right hand he held a hunting knife, the sharp blade of which glistened in the firelight; in his left hand was a revolver.

As quick as thought, he cut the bonds that bound his friend the pygmy chieftain. And then it was that Bryan fired again, before ever his father had time to lay hands upon a rifle.

The bullet cut across the man's face like a splash of sleet upon the window pane. Matteo

escaped with his life by a fraction of an inch. A red gash appeared quite suddenly from his cheek-bone to his ear, and the blood was seen to flow downward to his neck.

He turned like a savage beast. He was not ten yards from Bryan. Deliberately, and yet quickly, he raised his revolver and pressed the trigger. There was a loud report, and Bryan East was immediately conscious of a twinge of pain in his left ear—a pain so sudden and acute that it felt as if the whole ear had been severed from his head.

And on the instant, Valletta was felled like an ox. George East's great fist caught him under the chin, and he sank to the ground with a sound that was half gulp, half groan. Kamap dived like a rabbit towards the thickets, only to be caught in the strong arms of Lubanshi, who lifted him bodily from off his feet.

Matteo struggled like a wild cat. But he was powerless before the great strength of East, who now held him to the ground until he delivered him into the hands of the tribesmen. He then turned towards his son, and was just in time to avert a tragedy.

Lubanshi had lifted Kamap in his arms and

"Lubanshi was about to pitch the pygmy into the red-hot embers, when George East intervened."

now held him above his head. With one hand he gripped the pygmy by the scruff of the neck, whilst with the other he grasped the leather girdle the Obongo wore around his waist. Giving vent to the wild war-cry of the Red Tribe, the native was actually about to pitch the pygmy neck and crop into the red-hot embers of the camp-fire, when George East intervened.

"Stop that!" he roared.

Lubanshi slowly, as if reluctantly, placed the dwarf upon his feet.

"May I not kill him, my blood-brother?" he asked, as if aggrieved.

"You may not," said East. "The Obongo has done no more than serve his master, even as you have served me. We take both these prisoners with us, down the river."

Bryan's wound, when it was properly dressed and bandaged, proved neither serious nor painful, though the boy would carry a scar for the rest of his life.

They now progressed by easy stages along the trail which had been laid by George East and the two river-men when they had worked their way through the forest, following a course more or less parallel to the river. Their destination

was the scene of their first encounter with the pygmies, since here it was that East had buried the barter goods that he had promised Nsongo.

During this final journey Valletta was singularly reticent. Even in the evening, when seated by the camp-fire, he could not be induced to speak. He was as sullen and morose as Kamap. Strangely enough, the two captives seldom talked to one another.

During these days they had many opportunities of observing Matteo. There was always a wild look in the man's eyes. He scarcely slept at all, but night after night would remain sitting bolt upright, with his hands tied behind his back, grinding his teeth and gazing fiercely into the glowing embers of the fire.

Time and again his eyes would go to the great box of rubies that Nsongo's men were carrying; and then a look of unutterable rage would become stamped on every feature of his face.

At last they reached their old camping ground upon the river bank, where the pygmies had felled the great tree across the river. And here George East addressed the Red Tribesmen who had accompanied them from Lulawanga.

He thanked them for their services, told

them they were come to the end of their journey, and that nothing remained but for them to take back the barter goods which he had promised their chief. Before opening the cache, however, he would ask them to assist him in making a large dug-out canoe in which he and his companions could go down-stream, taking with them the chest that contained the red stones. As this was exceedingly heavy, the canoe would have to be a big one, and the more of them there were to work, the sooner would the task be finished.

East knew the native character too well to dig up the barter goods before he had got all the work out of them he wanted. Once they set eyes upon the brass rods, beads and looking-glasses he had brought from Balonga, he knew that not one of them could be persuaded to do half an hour's work. They would be sitting all day long in the sunshine on the river bank, admiring their own unprepossessing features in the looking-glasses!

The construction of the canoe was mainly the work of Motu and Bodia. The tribesmen, for all that, worked well enough; and in five days a long canoe had been made, capable of

carrying as many as twenty or thirty men. Four paddles also were made; and this number was considered enough, in view of the fact that the whole journey lay down-stream.

The canoe was launched amid a scene of great rejoicing; and when it was found that it was beautifully balanced and floated high upon the water, Bodia and Motu rushed to the edge of the river, flung themselves down upon their faces, and drank like wild beasts, for they were parched with thirst. The truth of the matter was that neither had touched a drop of water while the canoe was being made; for water on such occasions is always taboo, the Congo superstition being that if a man drinks water while he is making a canoe, the craft will certainly leak!

As it was then late in the day, East decided to wait till the following morning before opening the cache. And when this was done, never was seen upon a savage, tropic river a greater orgy of delight. The Red Tribesmen, who had never in their lives beheld such treasures, behaved like so many lunatics. They sang, danced and wrestled with one another, and threw themselves at the feet of the Englishman.

East smiled a trifle sadly. In his heart of hearts he could not but be sorry for these ignorant people. He knew that the whole of this so-called treasure could be purchased in Birmingham at wholesale price for about fifteen or sixteen pounds—and he was taking away with him, in exchange, a chest filled with rubies that must have been worth hundreds of thousands.

That afternoon a scene took place in which there was something almost pathetic. This was the parting of George East and Lubanshi. The true-hearted savage had learned to love his master; he worshipped the very ground East trod on. They had passed together through so many dangers, they had endured so many hardships, they had risked their lives so often, that they were bound together by the strongest ties of friendship and affection. The ceremony of blood-brotherhood had meant little in itself to East. But he knew that he had lived to learn that honour, fidelity and courage are to be found in the heart of a black man.

Lubanshi fell down upon his knees, and taking his master's hand cried like a little child. He asked for no favour; he asked for no gift. He was content that he had served

the white man faithfully through many arduous weeks.

Soon afterwards Lubanshi and his comrades set forth in single file upon their long return journey through the forest. They departed singing, the sound of their voices gradually dying away in the distant bush—wild men returning to the heart of the wilderness where they lived their lives in their own fashion, believing implicitly in their witch-doctors, in fetish and evil spirits. The Dawn of Civilization will some day, perhaps, touch the interior of this great, mysterious continent.

From the cache East had been able to replenish his exhausted stock of ammunition, though it appeared that there was no longer anything to fear. The Obongo had been dispersed ; Kamap, their chief, was a prisoner in the canoe; Matteo was also a captive, powerless —as they thought—to harm them any more.

The journey down-stream was a very different matter from the ascent. They travelled in absolute comfort, journeying many miles a day with only two paddlers, Bodia and Motu, who had little more to do than keep the canoe upon its course.

Every night they camped upon one bank or the other; and on these occasions they were careful to keep a sharp eye upon Matteo and Kamap. It was on the second night that Matteo spoke for the first time of his own accord, addressing himself to East.

"May I ask," said he in a quiet voice, "what you intend to do with me?"

"My duty," answered the Englishman.

"And what is that?"

"You have stirred up war among the natives," said East. "You have placed yourself at the head of a savage tribe, with whom you have attacked Europeans. You have deserted your post. You have sacked and destroyed a native town, and you have attempted to do murder. For this you shall answer. I intend to take you down to the Congo, and hand you over to the authorities at Matadi who will deal with you as they think fit."

East had spoken in the manner of a man who means every word he says. Matteo Valletta looked him straight in the eyes. Fully a minute elapsed before the prisoner answered.

"You will do no such thing," said he.

East looked up quickly.

"I think I will," he returned.

"You will do no such thing," repeated Matteo, and then deliberately turned his back upon East and refused to say another word.

Day by day as they progressed, the river became broader. Also the current became more swift as they approached the waterfall. The canoe was now gliding forward at a great velocity, Bodia and Motu keeping her bows in mid-stream.

"You had better draw in nearer to the left bank," ordered East. "We shall camp early to-night and beach the canoe. I want, if possible, to find our old trail."

"The trail's lower down," said Bryan. "I remember the place quite well. There was an island in mid-stream immediately opposite where we camped."

"And there's the island ahead!" cried East, pointing down-river.

As he spoke he turned his back upon Valletta, who was seated in the stern. And during that brief moment when East's back was turned and no one in the canoe had the slightest cause to suspect that Matteo would behave like the desperate madman he was, the Wizard of Talai

played his last trump card. With an action as quick as lightning, he snatched both paddles from the hands of the natives, picked up the two spares that were lying near him, and hurled them far from the canoe.

And there they were, in mid-stream, helpless, drifting rapidly towards a cataract that was but a few hundred yards ahead—those six breathless men and an amazing chest of rubies.

CHAPTER XII

OVER THE FALLS

THE canoe, no longer steadied by the paddles of Bodia and Motu, leapt like a living thing. The river in that place was straight as the shaft of a spear. For a few moments they sat staring at one another, Matteo laughing like the lunatic he was.

"Jump for it!" cried East. "If we wait longer we are lost!"

He unlaced his boots, threw off his coat, and plunged into the river. Bryan was in the water even before his father, struggling to reach the bank. The two negroes, who could swim like fish, dived together and came to the surface some distance from the canoe.

Motu was the first to reach the shore, where he danced in delight, frantically waving his arms. George East, who was not so strong a swimmer as the others, had as much as he could do to gain the bank, where he stood panting and exhausted.

Suddenly Bodia pointed excitedly down the river.

"Look, my master," he cried. "Look! The evil spirit that possessed Lubanshi has returned into the soul of the Wizard of Talai!"

They stood side by side, rooted in horrified amazement—mute, helpless witnesses of the actions of one who was unquestionably mad.

Kamap, the pygmy, had feared to jump into the water; and this fear was natural enough, since he was quite unable to swim. He had therefore remained in the canoe, tightly gripping the gunwales, staring about him with the wild eyes of one who realizes that he is face to face with death.

Suddenly, with a loud cry in which fear was mingled with fury, he flung himself upon the half-caste and seized him by the throat.

Sheer terror and the savage instinct of the forest pygmy lent him strength beyond his own, but for all that he was no more than straw in the powerful arms of Matteo.

Kamap was lifted bodily off his feet. Again Matteo's laughter rang out upon the river, seeming to be echoed in the midst of the great trees upon either bank.

Bryan found it difficult to breathe. He could see the white foam above the rocks at the head of the cataract, now not more than a hundred yards below the canoe that shot downstream like an arrow from a bow. Matteo's laughter still sounded in their ears, when they heard a shriek—piercing, strident, terrible.

They saw the body of the Obongo held in the arms of the madman, waved on high like that of a strangled hen. And then Kamap, the pygmy chieftain, was flung headlong to his doom.

And a moment after, the canoe was swept over the edge, into eternity—the great, white, seething waters that swirled and foamed beyond.

George East turned to his son. Bryan's face was white as snow. Throughout all this tragic incident not a word had passed between them. Neither had been able to move his eyes from those two doomed, unhappy men.

"The end of all his crimes," said East. "And the end of our adventure."

"You mean——?" the boy began.

"Yes," said his father. "The rubies of Lulawanga."

Bryan caught his breath. He had not thought of that. Nsongo's chest of rubies, which they had brought with them from the interior of the forest, now lay fathoms deep at the foot of the waterfall.

"We have lost all!" Bryan gasped.

East smiled sadly, and placed both hands upon the boy's shoulders.

"Not quite all," he answered. "As luck has it, I have about a dozen of the larger ones in my pocket. I kept them in case any misfortune should befall us. Though we've lost a fortune, these are beauties and should be worth quite a lot."

"How far are we from Balonga?" Bryan asked.

"But a few days," said East, "if we still had the canoe. But we are now in a sorry plight, in more ways than one. Beyond our jack-knives we have nothing; we have neither arms, ammunition nor food. I have never shown the white feather yet, but I confess that the prospect alarms me."

To have lost most of the prize they had travelled so many miles to gain seemed to Bryan East the greatest tragedy of all.

"Though he is now dead," said he, "I hate that man as I never did before."

"We must face the future," said his father, "not regret the past. We must start upon our journey without delay, whilst we have strength. If we hold to the river bank, Bodia and Motu will be able to catch fish for us to eat. But we must first find the line of our former portage, where we carried the canoe up-stream, past the cataract."

Within half an hour they had found their old trail which, as they knew, would take them through the forest a distance of several miles, to bring them out again upon the river some way below the waterfall.

Never since they left Balonga had they been in a plight so pitiful. The soles of a native's feet are as hard as leather, and Bodia and Motu had been accustomed to going bare of foot since the days of their childhood. But both East and Bryan found that they were unable to progress more than a few yards without enduring constant pain. Their bare feet were cut by thorns, bruised by the hard, knotted roots of the trees and bitten by white ants and other kinds of insects.

Though they could find little or nothing in the forest fit to eat, Hope is the greatest incentive to endeavour. They had no reason to despair. They knew that the journey was but a short one, that in a few days they must regain the river.

"And once again in the sunlight," East exclaimed, "we shall be nearer the end of our troubles. We have our jack-knives, and if we work hard, it should not take us more than three or four days to make a rough dug-out canoe big enough for us all, in which we can drop down to Balonga."

Three days later they came quite suddenly upon the river bank; and as soon as they found the bright sunlight in front of them, Bryan dashed forward with a loud cry of exultation, forgetful for the moment of the pain he suffered. It was as if the river with its broad, shining waters was an old and valued friend.

"The first thing we want is food," said East, "for we are all four as weak as kittens. We must set to work and make fish-traps. You can work with Bodia and I'll help Motu."

There are many forms of Congo fish-traps,

but the principle in all of them is the same—similar to that of a lobster-pot. They are made as a rule of wicker-work, but in this case they utilized the stems of creepers. These traps are unbaited. They are placed in the water with their mouths facing up-stream. Once they have entered, the fish seldom have the sense to find their own way out, since the mouths of the traps are folded back inside, like fly-traps or those glass inkpots which—for a very excellent reason—are so often used in schools.

The natives worked with extraordinary rapidity and two very serviceable traps were made within an hour. Motu then waded into the water and surveyed the river with the eye of an expert.

"This place no good," said he.

"Why not?"

"No fish here," said the man. "Only mud-fish, and they need a different kind of trap."

"Well, then," said East, "the matter seems simple enough. You come with me down-stream, until we find a better place. Bodia and my son can go up-stream. We can both return here at sunset, and it will be interesting to see who has made the best catch."

There were still four or five hours to sundown; and this was long enough, with average luck, to enable them to bring back enough fish for breakfast the following morning as well as supper that night. Before they separated, Bryan made a good camp-fire, using his father's magnifying-glass to light it by the sun's rays.

It was Bryan East who was destined that afternoon to make a discovery at once surprising and dramatic. He and Bodia departed upon what they imagined to be a harmless fishing expedition. Within an hour they were to find themselves confronted with yet another danger.

There was no beach on either bank in that part of the river. For the first half-mile, in consequence, they were able to make but slow headway, the thickets being extraordinarily dense. But after a while, at a place where the course of the river made an almost right-angular bend, they came upon a broad, sandy beach, on which they found a solitary crocodile that crawled swiftly into the water the moment he sighted them.

"Here we find fish!" exclaimed the negro. "There are weeds in the water and there are crocodiles—two certain signs."

He cut a branch from a tree and with this violently beat the surface of the water to scare away the great carnivorous reptiles as he waded in up to his waist. He then placed the fish-trap in position and returned rapidly to the bank.

Bryan seated himself in the shade of a tree, whence his eyes strayed to the opposite bank of the river. And immediately he saw something which left him too dumbfounded by amazement even to utter an exclamation of surprise.

The river was about three hundred yards across. Opposite, parallel to the outer or concave bank, was a long shoal, rising from the water like the back of a gigantic whale. The top of this was evidently high and dry except in flood time, for a few reed-like grasses were growing here and there in clumps. In this, however, there was nothing remarkable. Bryan's eyes were riveted upon a large, dark object, half in the water and half out of it, at the upper end of the shoal.

He looked and looked again, and then rubbed his eyes to make sure that he was awake. The object at which he was looking was a *canoe.*

It lay upside-down, with its rough keel uppermost. Moreover, its rugged, unfinished

appearance placed it beyond doubt that this was their own canoe.

Bodia was by this time out of the water. Bryan placed a hand upon one of the man's shoulders, and without saying a word pointed towards the shoal. The native opened wide both his mouth and his eyes, expressing his astonishment by making a kind of clicking sound in his throat, like the clucking of a hen.

"That is our canoe!" he exclaimed.

"You are sure of it?" asked Bryan.

"It was my own work," said Bodia, who for a moment appeared to have forgotten the assistance given him by Motu.

"Can we get it?" asked Bryan, after a pause.

The native looked doubtfully at the water.

"There are crocodiles," said he; "but I am ready to take the risk."

Bryan hesitated. He had no wish to send the man to his death. He had not been long enough in the country to know that a river negro thinks no more of risking his life in the water than he does of eating his dinner. Upon the African rivers canoes are frequently capsized; and if on such occasions ten men fall into the water and only nine come out again, the affair

is looked upon as unfortunate but inevitable. When the canoe has been righted, and the nine lucky ones are again seated in their places, one native will, perhaps, nod in a sage manner and philosophically observe : " Poor old Momba, he has gone to talk with the water-spirits. He will not come back to us again."

Bodia, therefore, had very little hesitation about taking to the water, though he took the precaution of beating the surface with a branch as he swam strongly to the other side of the river. Bryan, watching him with great anxiety, gave vent to a sigh of relief when he saw the man step high and dry upon the shoal.

For a moment the native rested, for he had swum rapidly. Even at that distance he looked a most extraordinary sight, with his wet, black skin glistening in the sunlight and his peculiar spike of twisted hair standing up on his forehead. Then he strode towards the canoe and bent down with the intention of turning it over.

Apparently the gunwales were stuck fast in the mud, which, to some extent had dried in the sun. Bodia struggled for some time without the least success. Weak as he was from lack of food and exhaustion, he could not easily free the

canoe from the mud. Quite suddenly, however, he succeeded, lifted the canoe several inches from the ground, and turned it the right way up, at the same time giving a loud cry of delight.

In all probability it was this shout—which was loud enough to carry a considerable distance —that was the cause of the trouble that followed. For at that very moment an apparition arose from out of the mud, at the other end of the shoal.

What this apparition was Bryan at first was unable to ascertain. It might have been anything, though it was more like a ghost than aught else, if such a thing as a ghost can be imagined in the bright light of the African sun.

And then the boy recognized the truth. *It was a man!*—a man who stumbled, staggered forward. He was covered from head to foot in mud. He held out his arms in front of him with clutching fingers from which the mud fell in drops. And in that mud-stained, tottering form Bryan East recognized the figure of Matteo Valletta, the Wizard of Talai.

With a shriek Bodia turned upon his heel and dived into the water.

CHAPTER XIII

THE WIZARD CALLS

TO have been swept over the cataract, to have survived in that maelstrom, to have seized the overturned canoe and to have drifted many miles down-stream until overcome by pure exhaustion, savoured of the superhuman. It was more than a dispensation of Providence. The man had, it seemed, as many lives as a cat.

Evidently the sudden shock of the impact when the canoe struck the mud-bank had hurled Matteo forward a distance of several feet, upon which he had probably lost consciousness. He had no doubt come to his senses soon afterwards, to make several futile attempts to turn the canoe over and float it again upon the river.

He had not the strength to swim to either bank; and all the time he remained upon the mud-bank—a matter of several days—he had been getting weaker and weaker, until at last, giving himself up for lost, he had again col-

lapsed, to lie in a semi-conscious condition in the mud.

Bodia's loud shout had caused Matteo to look up; and seeing that the canoe was no longer buried keel uppermost in the mud, and that it was possible for him to escape, with a superhuman effort he stumbled to his feet.

With difficulty he managed to reach the canoe, which he shoved clear into deep water. Then, literally tumbling in, he pitched headforemost over the gunwale, whilst the canoe immediately began to drift down-stream.

Bodia, at that moment, scrambled hastily up the beach and stood dripping and shivering in front of Bryan.

"Did you see him?" he cried. "Of a certainty, my master, it was the Wizard of Talai! He has conversed with the water-spirits that live at the bottom of the river, from whom he has learnt the secret of eternal life."

"I believe no such rubbish," answered Bryan. "But my father must learn what has happened. Come, Bodia, pull up your fish-trap. We must get back as quickly as we can."

At their camping place they were met by George East himself, who was considerably

excited. He came from the bush followed by Motu, who was carrying some half dozen small fish skewered upon a wooden stick, and burst out with his news before Bryan had time to get a word in.

"I've seen our old canoe!" he cried. "Half an hour ago it drifted past us. And very weird it looked, floating as sedately as a swan, with no one in it."

"*With no one in it?*" repeated Bryan, in a voice that was almost a shout.

"Yes," said East. "Nothing very extraordinary in that, was there?"

"More extraordinary than you think," cried the boy; "for when I saw the canoe last, Matteo Vallctta himself was on board."

"Matteo!" repeated East.

"Yes," said Bryan. "We found the canoe high and dry upon a mud-bank, but turned upside-down. Bodia swam across and turned it over. And the moment he did so, Matteo scrambled out of the mud, floated the canoe and jumped in. Bodia was so frightened that he swam back to me."

East tugged at his black, untidy beard which had not been trimmed for months.

"This is incredible!" he observed, after a long silence. "And yet, if you are convinced you saw him, I must believe you."

"Perhaps he was lying in the bottom of the canoe," Bryan suggested. "He might have fainted."

"That's possible," said East. "Well, if he gets down to Talai he'll soon recover his strength. The natives there are terrified of him. Wanyani, you will remember, is under his hypnotic influence."

"You mean he'll come back to look for us?"

"Naturally," said East. "He knows that if you and I come out of this business alive, we'll give evidence against him. And he knows, too, that we're both unarmed. In that case the bush is safer than the river; he can't miss us if we go down-stream. Besides, time is valuable, and it will take us at least four days to make a new canoe. To-morrow morning we must strike off into the bush. We know, of course, that the river makes a great curve between here and Balonga. If we march due west, we'll take a short cut through the forest."

Fatigued as Motu and Bodia were, it was some

time that night before they lay down to sleep. The two negroes sat cross-legged at the camp-fire, talking in whispers of the water-spirits who consort with the crocodiles and the mud-fish under the waters of the African rivers.

The following morning they set forth upon the last, short stage of their eventful journey. Their feet were sore and cut. They were physically exhausted. Little strength remained to them. They had gone months without sufficient nourishment; there had been days when they were starving.

Indeed, the hardships of those last three days were so severe that they came to care little whether they lived or died. The forest was so dense as to be almost impenetrable. It was so dark, too, even at midday, that only in a few places was there sufficient light to enable George East to see the needle of his compass. The undergrowth was tangled and crowded with thorns. They could find neither an elephant-track nor a path that had been made by human beings. As they had no hatchets, at times they were obliged to use their knives to cut away the great creepers that impeded their progress; and this work was so tedious that often they

preferred to climb through some small opening overhead.

To add to all their troubles, they could find little or nothing to eat. Wild manioc they found, but the bitter roots of this plant require to be properly treated and cooked, or else a kind of poisoning ensues which is particularly harmful to Europeans.

There was also a danger that they might entirely lose their bearings, since, even with a compass, it is difficult in the midst of such an interminable jungle to hold to a direct route.

On the morning of the third day, Bryan felt that he no longer had strength to place one foot before the other. Both Motu and Bodia were at the last gasp. They had lost their old fear of the bush-spirits—since familiarity during all these months had bred a certain contempt—but they had now something more tangible, more actual to be afraid of. Motu, the younger man, was so weak that from time to time he burst into tears, crying pitifully and softly.

Had it not been for East himself, without doubt all would have perished. The man was now, at this eleventh hour, to prove that his

courage, perseverance and tenacity were not less than his great physical strength.

For three days, from dawn to sunset, his efforts had been Titanic. Realizing that time was now of the utmost importance, that all three of his companions might perish on the journey if they did not soon come forth into the sunlight, he thrust his jack-knife into his belt, and using his great hands, tore down the branches that seemed for ever to bar their way.

He appeared insensible to pain and to fatigue. There was not an inch upon his all but naked body that was not cut and bleeding. The very hairs of his beard in places had been torn from his chin. On he went, blindly fighting his way through those terrible, amazing woods.

And then, at last, the sunlight! God's sun that meant both life and hope to them, new courage, food to eat, and water to drink.

East stood stock-still and listened. For a moment he never moved. Then, with a glad cry, he turned to Bryan who stood close behind him.

"Listen!" said he. "I can hear the water of the river."

A few minutes later all four came forth upon

the river bank, and immediately flung themselves face downwards to drink like thirsty beasts. Long and deeply did they drink of the mud-stained, tepid water, and then, stretched at their full length on the ground, they fell fast asleep. It was just as if they had suddenly been drugged.

East himself was the first to wake, to sit up and look about him. The sun was setting in the west above the forest trees.

He at once awakened the two natives, whom he ordered to make a fish-trap, while he himself prepared a fire. It was not until long after dark that Bryan woke up—awakened perhaps by the smell of grilling fish.

After they had eaten they sat talking for a while, until their attention was attracted by an extraordinary and unusual sound.

It came from somewhere near at hand—it seemed, from the river. It resembled a shout of triumph.

Three times was this cry repeated.

"What is it?" Bryan asked. "And where is it?"

"If you ask me," said East, "I think there must be someone on that island in mid-stream."

For a whole hour they could discover nothing. And then the moon arose—a round, white moon, the moon of the equator, which is like a great lantern in the sky. And in the moonlight they beheld a sight that filled them with wonderment.

The island was long and sparsely shaded by a single line of palm-trees beneath which there was little undergrowth, though grass waved in the moonlight, shimmering like silver. And upon the island, knee-deep in the grass, there walked one whom they could not fail to recognize as Matteo Valletta.

But search as they might they could see no sign of the canoe.

"Why has he landed there?" asked Bryan, in a breathless whisper.

East shrugged his shoulders.

"One can only guess," said he. "He had to go where the current took him. He had no means of guiding the canoe. Touching the island by chance, he must have gone ashore in search of food, for he could have had nothing to eat for days. And he lost the canoe. Either he was too weak to make it fast, or so exhausted that he overlooked a very important detail."

"And what's he doing now?" asked Bryan.

"Look at him, my boy, and see for yourself. He's standing still, in the very attitude in which you saw him that evening at Balonga, when he mesmerized Wanyani."

Bryan could see the man in the moonlight, standing between two palm-trees, his figure silhouetted against the bright moonshine on the surface of the river. He stood perfectly still with the fingers of his left hand pressed against his forehead, his head lowered a little.

For fully a minute no other word was said. East's eyes were fixed down-stream.

"Look there!" he cried at last.

A canoe, in which was a solitary man, was slowly approaching up-stream towards the island.

"Do you know who that is?" said East.

"Wanyani?"

"Wanyani. It is he who is wanted by the Wizard of Talai."

As the canoe drew nearer they shouted to Wanyani by name—shouted until they were hoarse. But the native took no notice. He sat in the canoe like a figure graven in stone, paddling slowly, as if he did so in his sleep. And the moment the bows touched the shore of the

island, Matteo seized the canoe and dragged it high and dry.

"Is Wanyani armed?" asked East. "Can you see, Bryan?"

"Yes. He is armed," said the boy. "He carries a hunting spear."

East looked ruefully at the water.

"I'd swim for it, like a shot," said he, as if speaking to himself, "if I thought I had the slightest chance. But the water's deep and alive with crocodiles."

CHAPTER XIV

JOURNEY'S END

NEVER could Matteo Valletta have given surer proof of his powers as a hypnotist. He was weak, starving and exhausted. The island was at least four miles above the factory of Balonga. And yet, by the mere exercise of his will-power, he had been able to summon Wanyani to him.

The man had found himself marooned, stranded on an island in mid-stream, where there was nothing to eat but the long, reed-like grass. He had lost the canoe. He could not swim to either bank, because he had not the strength, and because he knew the river to abound with crocodiles. Unable to save himself he had brought help from Balonga by means of hypnotism.

Wanyani had heard that relentless, silent voice ; and he had obeyed implicitly and blindly. Obedient, he now delivered up his spear.

Valetta looked at the man and laughed

softly. He might then have escaped, for Wanyani's canoe was ready to his hand. It was vanity and nothing else that caused him to delay. Having proved to himself the extent of his powers, he was tempted to exult in his deliverance. It was vanity that was his own undoing; for at that moment a dripping figure stole from the water in the shade of the palm-trees.

Gaining the island shore in the nick of time, even as a little whirlpool appeared on the surface of the river, from which arose a long-snouted evil head with great jaws that opened and closed, the swimmer looked back and shivered. It was George East, with his jack-knife between his teeth.

Matteo, who was armed with Wanyani's spear, caught sight of his enemy at once. Taken by surprise, blinded by rage, he drew back a step; and then, realizing his own weakness, knowing that it would be all up with him if he closed with his opponent, he hurled the spear at East. But as he was no adept in the native art of spear throwing, and was already dizzy and unsteady on his feet, the weapon flew so wide of the mark that it was Wanyani, and not East, that the sharp blade struck.

A deep, jagged wound in the shoulder had an extraordinary effect upon the native. The sudden pain brought him back to his senses, awakened him from his trance. With a loud shout he flung himself forward, and seized Matteo by the throat.

They fell together to the ground. Hypnotized no longer, Wanyani struggled desperately, because he was afraid. With both hands he clutched the throat of one whom he had always believed to be a supernatural being.

It was this, perhaps, as well as the circumstance that the man was not yet wholly recovered from his trance, that made his strength abnormal; and besides, Matteo was so thin and weak that he could offer but little resistance. The half-breed was all but strangled; and before George East could prevent it, Wanyani had lifted his victim in his arms, staggered with him to the river bank, and hurled him into the water.

On the instant, that little whirlpool appeared again, the water circling in the silver moonshine. A long, scaly tail lashed the surface. Great jaws clashed together as a scream that was terrible to hear rent the air. And then, all was silent.

Wanyani drew back, terrified at what he had done, convinced that he would be instantly destroyed in some mysterious manner. He stood in the moonlight upon the island, shivering as if from cold.

East spoke to him.

"Wanyani," said he, "here is an old friend, one who befriended you at Balonga!"

The man hesitated.

"Wanyani," East went on, "when you came from Talai there were weals upon your back where the lash of the whip had cut you. We carried you to the factory, tended your hurts; and then the Wizard came and took you back with him to Talai. Answer from your own heart, do you know me now?"

The native's dull intelligence slowly began to work. He was not used to thinking.

"My master!" he cried, upon a sudden. "My master, here is your servant: Wanyani gives you greeting!"

"There was a time once," said the Englishman, "when I found you a beaten and a broken man. And now, it is you yourself who find us in little better plight."

"There are good spirits," said Wanyani,

"as well as evil ones. A good spirit brought me here."

"There is one Great Spirit," said East. "Some day, perhaps, you may know the truth of that."

Wanyani appeared to be thinking.

"The white man is wiser than the black," said he.

That was all—the simplicity of a savage. He went to the canoe and steadied it, whilst East seated himself in the bows.

* * * * * *

Wanyani kept the canoe in mid-stream. Bodia and Motu paddled lazily, singing softly to themselves a long-drawn dreary song.

For they were at last in their own country, and their hearts were happy. They knew that they would soon set eyes upon the village where they lived, where they would be greeted by their friends.

As for Bryan, he lay back in the body of the canoe, resting against one of his father's knees, with a feeling of security and peace that he had not experienced for months. He felt utterly fatigued, and yet, strangely enough, he had no desire to sleep.

He watched the dark, gigantic trees of the forest as they seemed to drift past like an endless army of spectres. The underwoods were black as pitch, dark, silent, menacing, and—as it seemed—impenetrable. And yet it was in the midst of these very thickets that they had lived for months, fighting their way, inch by inch. Never had the boy believed that such a wilderness existed.

There was something kindly in the moonshine; the night was warm; and had it not been for the myriads of insects that droned above the surface of the water, there had been nothing to complain of. Mile by mile the canoe dropped down-stream, the two natives still paddling lazily; and then, suddenly, on rounding the last bend, they beheld before them the lights of the settlement of Balonga.

First were the fires of the native village, and, a little farther down, the bright lights in the windows of the factory itself. Late though it was, it was evident that the Belgian agent had not yet gone to bed.

As they drew near to the jetty, Bryan put the fingers of both hands to his lips and whistled. He had often astonished the natives of Balonga by

this performance. They knew that there was no one else on the river who had such a remarkable accomplishment. In consequence, almost at once the whole village became alive. Figures were to be seen isssuing from the grass-thatched huts; whilst others were moving to and fro in front of the fires, and crowding together upon the river bank.

The news of the travellers' return must have been carried to the factory itself, for as they drew alongside the door of the house opened, and before the bright light in the doorway they saw the silhouetted figure of the fat Belgian agent, who hastened down to the jetty.

"Who's there?" he cried.

"George East," came back the answer.

"East!" exclaimed the other. "I never thought to see you alive again. And the rubies?" he asked. "What of Lubanshi's rubies?"

East smiled, shook his head, and pointed towards the river.

"Most of them lie under the water," he answered, "many miles from here, and no power on earth can ever get them back again."

The Belgian shrugged his shoulders after the manner of his people.

"Then your journey has been—for nothing!" he exclaimed.

"No," said East; "we have saved a handful of the stones. We have waged war with Nature, with barbarity and cruelty. Victory is its own reward, my friend; and in whatsoever we have failed, we have learnt to accept the fortune of war."

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